

Not All Who Are Lost Wander {ON PERMANENT HIATUS} by chorkie

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst with a Happy Ending, BENNY HAMMOND DESERVED BETTER, Before/during/after Stranger Things Seasons 1 and 2, Canon Compliant, Implied/Referenced Sex, No Alternate Universe (for now), OC driven plot, Supplementary to Stranger Things, Who is number 10?, and his family is precious, children dropping f-bombs, flangst, kinda violent, neighboring city to Hawkins

Language: English

Characters: Benny Hammond, Carlo Valdes (OC), Carolyn Weiss (OC), Deb Hammond (OC), Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Geoffrey Breen (OC), Harriet Dixon (OC), Jessie Hammond (OC), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Mike Wheeler, Parker Montgomery (OC), Ten(Timothy Weiss) (OC), Timothy Weiss (OC), Vladamir Leonid (OC), Xiang Wei "Mister Pickle" Li (OC)

Relationships: Deb Hammond/Parker Montgomery, Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-12-08

Updated: 2017-12-03

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:08:29

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 10

Words: 34,044

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

{ON PERMANENT HIATUS}

Hawkins is not the only small hick town to be affected the opening of the portal, on the night of November 6th, 1983. The sleepy community of Poppiesville, Indiana is shaken by otherworldly events, and people. Deb is forced to bear her family's burdens once more, as the Hammond's say goodbye to one family member, but gain another. Her sister Jessie is convinced that nobody can replace her twin

brother, John Paul, and Deb agrees. But it doesn't take a replacement to heal a wound. And the strange boy that finds his way to their house one night isn't just anybody. She, a young reporter namer Parker and Jessie's friends, the Guild of Rogues and misfits, band together to discover who this strange boy Ten is, while their town is haunted by two mysterious murders. Everything is not what it seems.

1. Lab Rats

Author's Note:

{ON PERMANENT HIATUS}

AN: Hello, lovely people of the Stranger Things fandom! My contribution isn't much, but it's the best I've got. If you like what you read, please favorite, follow, share with fellow Stranger Things addicts and COMMENT your criticisms, constructive or otherwise just as long as it MAKES SENSE. This is an OC driven plot, but there is interaction from the Hawkins gang.

Also, DISCLAIMER! I DON'T OWN THE STRANGER THINGS UNIVERSE. I only made up my own town of Poppiesville, and a whole mess of OCs. The monster is also of my own creation.

Enjoy!

November 2nd, 1983

Ink was smudged across Ten's long, bony hands. His fountain pen danced lightly as he put the finishing touches on his drawing, marking intricate lines on the page. Satisfied, he took two piece of tape and placed them at the top corners of the paper. He got up from the desk and moved to the picture wall on his left. Finding an empty spot, he stuck his latest work to the cold white tile. Ten took a step back, admiring the lifelike image of his cat Mickey, looking ready to walk off the page and brush affectionately against his leg. He glanced over to his bed, where his feline muse was lying down, blue eyes drifting open and shut, tail twitching occasionally. The boy hummed along to the tune playing from the cassette player.

"Good times, bad times

You know I had my share

When my woman left home

With a brown eyed man

Well, I still don't seem to care"

Ten didn't know the name of the song, but he knew the tune and lyrics by heart. He didn't even know songs had names. He just thought of them by what they sounded like, and the words. Not that he understood most of the words. Only about a third made sense to him. Sometimes, he would take the cassette out from the player and shake it, poke it, try to get it to make sound on its own, try to figure out how it worked. There were words printed on the front side of the tape that read: "Led Zeppelin." Maybe that's what the sound that it made was called. Or perhaps the object itself was 'Led Zeppelin.' Ten didn't know.

The door to Ten's cell opened, and in walked Papa and two men in white. Papa looked in a pleasant mood today, and Ten dared to hope a little. Maybe today would be easier.

"Come along, Ten," Papa said, offering a hand to the blue eyed boy. Ten warily took it, slipping his smaller one into Papa's rough and gnarled one. "We have much work to do today." They walked together down the plain white halls, corridor after corridor. Anyone without a perfect memory could have easily gotten lost. However, Ten didn't even know what forgetting was. He still remembered his mother's face only a few moments after he was born. He remembered Papa taking him away, mother and child both screaming. An involuntary shudder crawled up his spine.

They reached a smaller room with a table and two chairs on opposing sides. Ten knew the drill. He took a seat in the farther one, Papa the closer. A net of electrodes was placed on Ten's head, and the brain activity monitor clicked to life. The men in white stood behind a glass wall watching Ten, and pressing buttons on a large dais. One of them carried in a wire cage with a small animal inside, with sleek grey fur and a long, pink tail. Its whiskered nose quivered and sniffed the air, beady eyes absorbing everything. Placing its little pink paws on the cage, it stared up at Ten. The man holding the cage placed it on the table, along with box made of pungent, fresh cut wood. Ten quickly read the man's name tag: "Graham."

"Today we are going to try something different," said Papa. "I want you to guide the rat through the maze. *Be the rat.*" He nodded. The man in white, Graham, lifted the 'rat' out of the cage and opened the top of the box, placing it inside. Graham left the room. "Now, take a quick look at it," Papa ordered. Ten barely had to glance at the maze to have it perfectly mapped out in his head. The white haired man turned the box so that only he could see into it, and folded his gnarled hands on the steel table. "Alright, Ten. You can begin."

The boy took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He sensed minds around him; five beside his own. Papa's, the three men in white's, and the rat's. The glow of the four human minds were far brighter than the little creature's, like multiple moons compared to a single star. Ten gently pushed his consciousness into the rat's. He saw Papa through it's eyes, watching with rapt attention. It turned and sniffed the air cautiously, testing the human scent mingled with antiseptic and fresh wood. Ten took control. He guided the rat through the intricate maze confidently. About halfway through, he felt it's mind struggle against his own, weak in comparison, but fighting. He coaxed it onward with the thought of food at the end, and it complied for a while. It's heart started to race as Ten urged it forward. It fought him fiercely. Ten knew if he pushed it too hard, the rat's light would *darken*. But he had to try. He increased pressure. Their hearts pounded in tandem, growing faster and faster. The small creature's body started to convulse violently. It screamed in pain. Ten saw his own body writhing. He felt it too. The mouse's and boy's pulses were speeding at an impossible rate. Deafening shrieks filled the air, and were cut off abruptly. *Snap*. Ten heard only one heartbeat: his own. Eyes flew open. His hospital gown was drenched in sweat, and his hair stood on end. A proud gleam came into Papa's eyes, somehow cold in contrast to his warm smile.

"Incredible," the man said quietly. "You'll be given an extra paper allowance, and a new pen."

Ten blinked, hardly processing the praise. Something warm and wet trickled down onto his upper lip, and he reached up to wipe it. His hand came away crimson.

"I did good?" he whispered, almost unbelieving. Papa smiled, that warm smile that made Ten fear, love, and hate him all at the same

time. He reached across the table and tenderly mopped up the rest of blood under his nose with a white cloth, staining it red.

"Yes, very good."

Against half of his own conscience, a warm glow filled him, and he returned a shy smile of his own, his bright blue eyes shining. All in one moment Papa was back to business, and stood, calling in Graham and another man to escort Ten back to his room. The boy glanced at the box and froze. The rat's body lay still in the maze, blood oozing from its eyes and ears.

"Ten," Papa said firmly, breaking his daze. He nodded numbly and followed the men to his chamber.

He had broken it, blown out its light. The rat. He snapped the feeble mind in half like a twig.

He had Papa's approval for it.

Part of Ten was elated. The other was revolted. He rushed to the toilet as soon as the door clicked shut behind him, his dinner rising up into his mouth. His stomach heaved long after it was emptied. Finally, he flushed it down and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Shakily shoving himself to his feet, he stumbled into the sink and let the frigid water run into his mouth, washing away the foul taste of bile. He felt flushed and feverish and frozen all at once. Pulling off his hospital gown, he dropped to the carpeted floor and laid there. The old rug was coarse and rough against his bare skin, chafing.

He had *ended* it. Darkened it.

So that's what death was.

Ten *killed* the rat.

Papa was happy. Papa had touched him, ever so briefly. Ten craved that moment, the affection.

Disgust, anger, at himself, and his desperate need for a touch. A sob formed in his throat, stuck there like a hard knot. The picture wall

became a mottled river of color. He choked, tears flowing freely down his face and into his ears. Warm feline fluff brushed against his naked body, settling into the crook of his side with a soft *prraow*. Ten hugged Mickey close.

I'm just as bad as the Bad Men, he thought. *I'm just as bad as Papa.*

"I'm just like Papa," he whimpered aloud, eyes screwed shut. "I'm just like the bad men. They hurt, they darken. I hurt, I darken."

November 3rd, 1983

Anger burned hot in Ten's fiery blue eyes, set hard in rebellion.

"No," he said, through gritted teeth. Papa's eyebrows drew together like angry stormclouds, ready to crash together.

"What did you say?" he warned. Ten looked over at the caged cat on the table. It had a grungy orange coat, short and matted, unlike Mickey's well-groomed white. Pacing the cramped cage anxiously, it pinned its ears and the boy and hissed, green eyes glaring.

"No."

"Do you know what that means, Ten? I don't think you understand. I am not asking you; I am *telling* you," said Papa, thunderclouds ready to clap and unleash the storm. The cat's hackles raised. Ten sensed its terror, and tried to calm it with his mind. It repelled his conscious and tried to block him out. The startling blue eyes met the man's, full of fearful determination.

"No."

A hard look covered Papa's face. "Switch the inhibitor on," he ordered, and reaching into his suit jacket, he brought out an object that made Ten's heart sink into his stomach and dread wash over him. The boy's head snapped back, teeth grinding together as the hot, crackling sensation at the base of his skull spread over him. His fingers dug into the metal armrest, as every muscle in his body

spasmed, and the pain rolled over him in waves. It stopped. His pulse started to slow, and he released the death hold on his chair. He touched the warm metal device on the back of his neck, wanting to rip it from his flesh like a tick buried in his skin. He'd tried before; it was like pulling out his own eyeball. Papa had explained that even if he did manage to free himself of it, it would kill him. The damned thing was embedded in his spinal cord.

"I'll give you one last chance," Papa said, his voice reasonable. His thumb hovered over the remote. Ten stared back at him, rubbing around the monitor. Papa sighed. Ten tensed again as the spasm shot through him. Convulsions shook his small frame with increasing violence. Blinding lights and colors flashed before his eyes, crackling with electricity.

Every inch of him was on fire, every nerve sending one signal: pain. A strangled groan came from his throat. He gasped, choked, then spat onto the steel surface before him, crimson. Ten's tongue had a heartbeat all of its own pumping out blood into his mouth. Gingerly, he stuck it out, and saw the red welling out from a tooth shaped cut. He barely had time to pull his tongue back before the blinding, deafening, white-hot agony seized him. It might've last thirty seconds, or thirty minutes, Ten didn't know. His body collapsed onto the table, breath sharp and ragged. Papa was yelling at him; Ten couldn't tell what. The only thing he could hear was the deafening ringing in his ears. His throat was raw. He must have been screaming. Papa pointed at the cat, eyes filled with rage. A scornful smile crept onto Ten's face, revealing the blood stained teeth. He said something he'd never actually heard anyone say out loud; it was a phrase he overheard in the minds of Papa's men, and he'd heard it enough times to get the gist of what it meant.

"Fuck you." The boy wasn't sure if he'd managed to vocalize the words or just mouth them, but judging by the look of unbridled fury on Papa's face, his sentiment had been expressed. Papa grabbed him by the front of his hospital gown and dragged him across the stainless steel table, inches from him face. Spittle flew at him, the man's mouth forming words Ten couldn't understand. He was swung around and slammed into the hard tile, head rebounding off. A fist connected with his jaw, another beneath his eye. He desperately tried to block

the heavy punches, shielding his face with his hands. Finally, blow after blow, Ten slumped limply to the floor, knees buckling like broken twigs. The ringing in his ears was reduced to a high pitched whine. The shifting, blurry figure of Papa stood above him, chest heaving, and hand stained with Ten's blood. The boy drew a ragged breath, blinking away the tears streaming unchecked down his face and mingling with the blood in his mouth.

"Escort Ten back to his chamber," he said, unfocused eyes staring into space, "and bring me his cat." Large, rough hands lifted Ten up by the arms onto his feet.

"No," he whispered, "No, please, Papa, no! Don't hurt him! Don't take Mickey!" Ten was thrashing wildly, screaming over his shoulder. Papa stood there transfixed. The two men dragged the hysterical child down the hall. "No, Papa, no, please don't hurt him, no!" He shrieked, one last time, before they launched him into the chamber. *Smack.* His body hit the ground. Ten scrambled over to Mickey, cradling him protectively in his thin arms. The massive, cruel hands tried to pry them open. With a desperate wail, the cat was wrenched away from his body. Mickey hissed and clawed at his captors. Ten flung himself at the closing door, hoping to stop it. He crashed into it as it slammed shut, jarring his whole skeleton. Bellowing rage exploded out of his chest, and he pounded the door with both fists, vision red with rage. Ten lifted up his wooden desk chair and smashed it against the door. It shattered, splinters flying everywhere. A shard buried itself in his leg; he hardly noticed. Launching herself onto the bed, ripping the sheets off the bed, tearing at the mattress. Fatigue washed over him, and he slumped down into the barren bed, defeated. "No," he sobbed, broken, "please, no. Mickey. Papa."

Ten's eyes popped open disjointedly, one after another. They felt sticky and dry, as though he'd been sleeping with them half open. The world was sideways, rocking back and forth gently. His mind was dazed and groggy. Once he blinked the blurriness from his eyes, he found himself in a wire cage carried by a giant, with hands larger than his entire head. Another giant, white haired and dressed in black lead the way down the huge corridor. Ten looked down at his limbs and started; he didn't have two arms and two legs, he had four legs, all covered in fluffy white fur with delicate, feline paws at the

ends. A wave of realization washed over him.

He wasn't in his body.

He was *with* Mickey.

He saw through Mickey's eyes, heard what he heard, felt what he felt. Knew his thoughts.

The cat was still sleepy, probably from a sedative. The man in front of them was Papa. *I know where we are going*, he thought, with a bodiless shudder. Mickey started to panic, as he sensed Ten's fear growing. What was happening, he didn't know. But it was bad. Something very bad was going to happen to Mickey. He hissed at the man carrying him, eyes glaring fearfully. They turned aside into a familiar room, furnished with a steel table and two chairs. The cage Mickey was in was placed unceremoniously on the table, dominating its surface area. Papa left, retreating behind the walls of the observation room, peering out through the glass. A boy, no, a girl, about Ten's age was escorted in, looking around the room with wide, doe like eyes. Her hair was buzzed close to her head, and she was dressed in only a hospital gown. She sat in the chair, across from Mickey, and a large net of electrodes was placed around her skull, whirring and beeping to life. The cat paced the cage with agitation, seething at the girl. She turned to Papa expectantly.

"Now Eleven," he said, adopting a firm but kind voice, one he never used with Ten, "I want you to . . . Exterminate the cat." 'Eleven' glanced at Mickey, piercing eyes wrought with confusion. "You know the consequences if you disobey," Papa added. Ten saw the two sides of her conflicting: the desire to please Papa, and the desire to spare this strange creature she'd never encountered before. The brain activity monitor picked up speed, as did her breathing, growing shallow. Eleven kept her face turned down, away from Papa, but lifting up to see him every now and then. Her features contorted, and tears threatened to overflow in her eyes as a strangled whimper formed in her throat. Mickey hissed fiercely, sensing the hot tension in the air. The girl looked up at Papa, then looked back at the cat repeatedly, back and forth, and back and forth. Beeping from the monitor grew faster. Her chest heaved. She shook her head slightly, then brushed the net of wires off. The beeping stopped. With a deep

breath Papa set his face, placing his hands on his hips. Eleven shook her head vehemently, stifling a sharp breath. The angry jawline turned to stone, and he looked down with a motion of acceptance. Papa muttered to the other men in the observation room and turned away, rubbing his face with his hands. Two of Papa's employees entered the room and lifted Eleven up by the arms, hauling her away down the cold halls. Ten felt the hard, calloused hands on him, and knew he was now with the girl.

"No!" she cried, kicking and thrashing, much like Ten himself had done not long ago. "Papa, Papa!" Her voice was raw with screaming after him, animalistic terror pumping adrenalin into every vein in her body. The men in white reached the end of the hall and tossed her into a copper room with the door ajar. She flailed in the air, hitting the ground with a sickening thud. Her face contorted in rage and she scrambled to her feet as the heavy door started to swing closed, almost shut, when it flew back violently, throwing one of men into the tiled wall. Broken porcelain and plaster crumbled off the place where he hit, body dropped lifelessly to the ground. The other man, shocked and angry, drew a baton and switched it on, starting after her. With blood trickling from her nose, she fixed her fiery gaze on him. A quick twitch of the neck, a gut wrenching crack, and he crumpled like paper. Eleven panted, leaning against the copper wall, hot liquid now dripping from her ears too, and panted. Papa appeared in the open doorway; looked at the body shaped dent in the wall, looked at the corpses on the ground, looked at Eleven, wonder in his cold eyes. He slowly started toward her. She leaned back, trembling, slumping to her knees. Papa's hands stroked her shaved head gently, cupping her bloodied ears. The girl cried softly, craving and hating that touch with all her heart.

"Incredible," he whispered, leaning down to pick her up. Eleven gave into his arms, too exhausted to fight or object. She sniffled. Unhurriedly, he carried her back down the hall, enraptured by her face. The sorrowful brown eyes held contact with his, until oblivion took over, and the world faded.

2. Death, Burial and Resurrection

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello, again! Please review, follow and favorite if you like what you read. Give me criticism or give me death! As long as it makes sense!

Enjoy!

~Chorkie

November 4th, 1983

The boy awoke feeling like his body was decaying and falling apart. He stiffly got to his feet and stumbled to the sink. Ten threw off his torn and bloodied hospital gown, and evaluated his naked body in the large mirror by the faucet. Blood had dried on the front of his face like plaster, cracking in the creases of his skin. His left eye was swollen nearly shut, the surrounding tissue an ugly purple, as was his bruised jaw. The whole head area throbbed painfully, but nothing compared to the stabbing in his thigh, where a wooden splinter width of his finger stuck out. His mouth tasted of blood, and upon opening, saw the tooth shaped bite mark on his tongue. He bent over the bowl of the sink and twisted the tap, gingerly rinsing. Moving deliberately, carefully, he shuffled to the bed and eased himself onto it. His tired eyes closed.

Eleven.

That was her name.

Ten wasn't alone.

He wanted to reach out to her; to thank her for sparing Mickey, even if he was dead now. If his inhibitor hadn't been switched on, he would have. He blinked, and limped slowly toward his picture wall, covered in masterpieces. Ten's fingers traced the lifelike sketch of Mickey, drowsing lazily, looking up at Ten with half-lidded eyes. Tears blurred his vision, and a hard lump formed in his raw throat.

His gaze drifted to a picture of a wooded forest, the sun casting a halo of light around a blinding beam, illuminating a patch of leaf covered ground. Ten had gleaned that image from Papa's mind; it was his favorite to go camping on the weekends, between intense testing periods. Another drawing came into view: a small thrush perched on a powerline, white and brown speckled belly feathers ruffled in the breeze. The child turned to his desk, reaching into the bottom right drawer and pulling out a small sheaf of used paper out from under a stack of blank pages. These were Ten's most coveted possessions, now that Mickey was gone. They were his heart and soul poured out, for only him to see. He shuffled through them slowly, gently lowering himself down onto the cold floor, now that his chair was no more. The first drawing was of arms outstretched to a pair of young children, running to the embrace with looks of pure joy on their faces. A woman stood in the background, hands on hips, with a warm smile. Ten's blurred eyes followed the almost imperceptible lines hidden in the color and shading spelling out 'Korg.'

Korg. That was the name of the man Ten got the image from. The next drawing showed a woman in a hospital bed sitting up, one arm reaching out to the viewer. She was pretty; pale skinned with freckles flecked across the bridge of her nose, and dark, curly hair cut short. Panic was etched into every line of her body, and her features were flushed with an expression of mingled terror and rage. Two suited men held her down, and one had reached inside his suit for a gun. In tiny, delicate letters, woven into the creases of the men's suits was written, 'my mother.'

The last piece was an intricate, pencil shaded bust. The stern face was set in deep lines, showing the age of the man. The highlighted half of the portrait was noble, that eye full of intelligence, and offering opportunity and reward. A slight smile graced his lips, giving him a teacherly look. The darkened side was cold and aloof, and full of guile. Ten slid these back into the open drawer and closed it, opening another and pulling out his supplies. He dumped them on the floor. After selecting a pencil and blank paper, his hand hovered above uncertainly. With a light, delicate motion he marked the page. His brow set in concentration as the picture began to emerge. It was Papa again; this time, however, as Eleven saw him. His face is gentle, yet firm, and expectant. Seeing great things when Eleven doubted

herself. Still, Papa's likeness stared back at Ten with a shadow of fear and longing upon it, as though Eleven were realizing that Papa was not exactly the man she thought he was. Ten sighed, brushing the finished work to the left and starting on a new project. Every inch of his head hurt, and his entire leg was cripplingly painful; but he had to go on. He couldn't rest until he did.

Another bust appeared, dressed in a hospital gown, and hair buzzed. Each half of the face was different: the leftmost half belonged to Ten. Pale, with freckles splattered across his nose and cheek, blue eye holding a curious, but haunted look. The other side was the girl. Her intense, doe like gaze stared out at Ten, vulnerable, full of fear, but determined. He etched "010" under his likeness, and "011" beneath hers. He stowed them away in the drawer again, leaning against his desk and closing his eyes, then snapping them open again as the door to his room swung open. In came a thin, balding man carrying a loaded steel tray. The boy recognized him as Breen, one of his main doctors. He shoved his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose and set the tray down on Ten's bed.

"Sit," he ordered, not unkindly. Ten groaned as he got to his feet, muscles sore and bruised and protesting. He did as Breen asked and waited patiently as the man arranged his tools, muttering to himself nervously. Breen glanced up at Ten and handed him an ice compress for his face, his eyes far away and preoccupied. The doctor got to work. He elevated Ten's injured leg on the bed, and examined the large splinter buried in his flesh. Ten grit his teeth as Breen started to pull on it with a pair of tongs. His rapidly darkening vision cleared as the shard was freed with a final yang. The boy panted raggedly. The culprit was as long and as thick as his little finger at its largest. Breen flashed him a quick look of sympathy, then turned his attention to the blood beginning to pour out of the open wound. No amount of pressure with his hands was stopping it, and Ten was feeling woozy. The man swore under his breath as he reached for the tourniquet and fumbled, knocking it onto the ground. His fumbling fingers picked it up and strapped it onto Ten's thigh. The child winced as the numb, tingly feeling spread over him. The bleeding dramatically slowed, then stopped completely.

Breen inhaled deeply. He opened a bottle of antiseptic and poured it

onto a cloth. A sudden scream tore itself from Ten as the fiery burning shot up his body when the wet cloth touched his leg. It seemed to sizzle and eat away his skin like acid. Gradually, the pain lessened, then disappeared. Breen cut a length of wire and threaded it through the needle, and then Ten's flesh. Only a few stitches were needed to close it, and the operation was done quickly. The doctor unstrapped the tourniquet and stowed it on the tray. The blood rushed back into Ten's calf and foot, feeling like a million needles were stuck in them.

"Turn around, please," said Breen, motioning with gloved fingers. Ten obeyed, brows drawing together in confusion. A soft click came from behind him, and he had the vague sensation that his inhibitor was opened, and being examined. The panel closed again after about thirty seconds, but Ten was left with the impression that something wasn't right here. He started to turn his head to ask a question, when a sharp prick sprouted in his neck, and a wave of fatigue hit him suddenly. His eyes drifted open and closed drowsily. The boy managed to hold onto consciousness just long enough to see Breen pick up his tray and exit hurriedly, the heavy door shutting behind him. Ten sunk into the bare mattress, dead to the world.

Geoffrey Breen's tense shoulders began to unknot as he walked briskly out of Ten's chamber, breathing a sigh of relief. He and Harriet had been perfecting the two parts of the serum for months now, managing to successfully reanimate ten rabbits and three dogs, consecutively. No worries in that department. As long as Carlo Valdes, the coroner pulled through with his masterful fake corpse, and gave Ten the other half of the serum when Ten was declared dead, everything was fine. Nothing could possibly go wrong, Breen told himself, only half convinced. He and Dr. Dixon had done their parts: it was up to Carlo. Plenty could go wrong. Was it likely? No. Things had been planned out too well. Their methods were tried and true.

He wiped the nervous sheen of sweat off his forehead. Breen inhaled deeply, then started.

"Well, if it isn't Geoffrey Breen," said a cringy, affable voice. "I was hoping I'd find you." The biochemist turned around, a smile plastered

on his face.

"Sullivan," he replied, in the most cheerful voice he could muster. "How's the book coming along?" The part time security guard, part time author with meticulously combed, platinum blonde hair flashed Geoff a blinding grin.

"Great, just great. I've finally figured out my plot twist. Took me long enough, eh?" Sullivan jabbed the shorter man in the ribs with a playful chuckle.

"Yeah, I guess so," he laughed uneasily. Sullivan was off-puttingly friendly and cheerful at all times, and Breen, like any sane person, didn't trust Sullivan because of it.

"Hey, why don't we grab a beer later on and catch up? I've hardly seen you since you joined that *ménage à trois* with Dixon and that Mexican fellow, Valdes-

"Oh, no," stammered Geoff, face becoming red and heated at the suggestion. "It's nothing- nothing like that. We- we're just - working together."

"'Working together,' huh?" Sullivan remarked, wiggling his eyebrows. "I'm joking, I'm joking," he chortled. "I'm just curious about what's so important that you keep it under such tight wraps."

"It's nothing *important*... My son and Harriet's are on Carlo's baseball team. Carlo coaches. Nothing you know, *secret*." The muscular guard rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Hmm. I would've sworn Carlo himself say he was more of a soccer kind of guy," he mused aloud, feigning ignorance and exposing Geoff's clumsy lie.

"Oh, you know Carlo," Breen laughed forcefully, shoving his trembling hands into his pockets. "Always a fickle one, isn't he?"

Sullivan flashed his shark-like grin. "Is he, now?" He glanced at his watch, sighing, "Whelp, I'd better get home before my dinner gets cold, and my girl gets cold feet. Tomorrow night? For our drink?"

"Sure," muttered the very relieved Geoff, shuddering a bit as Sullivan walked past him, whistling a too cheerful tune. Unnerving. *The jig is up*, he thought grimly. He hurried down the corridor, away from Ten's chamber and toward Harriet Dixon's office. Rapping his knuckles on the door that read, "Technology Brainstorming Dept," he looked behind him cautiously.

"Come in," came a muffled voice. Geoff did, being careful to close the door behind him. The petite, bird like woman was perched on the edge of her seat, delicate hands nimbly working on a small, intricate device. Wavy brown hair flecked with silver cascaded down her shoulders royally, but she herself had a quiet, industrious aura about her. She looked over her glasses at Dr. Breen.

"Geoff, everything according to plan?" Harriet inquired.

"So far, so good," he affirmed. "But Sullivan's on my case. I don't trust him."

"Who does?" remarked the woman, cracking a dry smile.

"For good reason. But if anyone asks, Bobby is on Carlo's baseball team with Geoff Jr."

Dr. Dixon's well groomed eyebrows furrowed. "Are we made?" Geoff shook his head hesitantly.

"Not yet. We can still pull this thing off, as long as Valdes sticks to the schedule." He glanced nervously at the closed door, as if expecting Sullivan to walk through it at any time. "I'd better get back to MedLab before we're seen together. Take care, Harriet."

"You too," she called after him, as he turned away and left the tidy office, hoping all was well.

November 5th, 1983

Dr. Brenner had been called; Ten's condition was officially an emergency. Breen had been called to the scene, along with the other most competent doctors available. The boy was convulsing, struggling against the three men it took to hold him down as they

sprinted down the halls with the gurney, toward the MedLab. Blood ran like a leaky tap down his nose, mingling with the white foam billowing from his mouth. As much as Geoff hated to see the poor child like this, he was elated that things were going exactly as planned, to the minute. The spasming stopped suddenly, and the heart monitor went from 190 beats per minute to nothing, ringing a high pitched monotone. Brenner swore loudly, biting his nails and pacing like a caged animal.

"Do something," he barked, startling the crowd of scientists. "Start CPR, resuscitation, blood transfusion, something, NOW!" Geoff inserted the needle into the boy's arm, hooking it up to the elevated blood bag and watching it drain into the seemingly lifeless Ten's body. Dr. Earl started chest compressions, counting aloud in a strained voice, stopping to inflate the still lungs with air. No response. *As expected*, Geoff thought, rubbing the defibrillator paddles as they whined to life.

"Charging to two Joules," he called aloud, standing over the motionless body on the gurney. "Clear!" Ten jerked. The doctor pulled the paddles back. Nothing. Earl resumed CPR, placing his gloved hands on Ten's chest and pumping. The urgency was thick and sweltering in the air, like a cloud of steam ready to suffocate them all.

"Clear!" Continued unvarying tone from the heart monitor. Breen charged the defibrillator to four Joules. Nothing. He tried again. Still, nothing. After fifteen minutes of no response, Ten was declared dead. Brenner wiped his face with his hands and sighed.

"Have the body sent down to the coroner for post-mortem. I expect a full report by tonight. Then dump it in the Vat." Geoff breathed deeply, relaxing a bit. So far so good. Now, it was all up to Valdes.

Carlo marveled at the masterpiece in front of him; it truly was convincing. As someone who spent most of his time around dead people, he could testify that this fit the description to a tee. Hell, even had real blood and organs just in case. Removing some random Joe's guts and sticking them in the dummy was a genius idea. Carlo wished he could claim it as his own, but he had to give props to

Breen. Man had a head on his shoulders and knew how to use it, unlike most academic freaks.

He expected Dr. Brenner any minute now, to hear his practiced autopsy report. In the meanwhile, the coroner hummed quietly, washing his tattooed arms and hands under the near freezing water. Toweling his hands off, he scratched his well groomed goatee and ran his fingers through his slicked back hair. Footsteps echoed down the hall, and the doorknob turned. The white haired man appeared, face grave and worn.

"Doc," Valdes greeted, adopting a slightly more somber attitude. Brenner didn't look at him. He had eyes only for the fake corpse lying stiffly on the table, legs covered with a thin sheet.

"This is him?" he asked, gaze never leaving the exact image of the little boy, freckles and all.

"Yeah," replied the Hispanic man. The scientist started to gag and turned away, inhaling deeply through his nose until he regained his composure.

"Cause of death?"

"Brain aneurysm due to extreme mental and emotional strain and overuse of telepathic abilities," Carlo said, pointing with his little finger to the incisions on faux Ten's head. "It's likely other experiments will have similar fates if they overuse their powers an' shit. Gotta be careful of that." Brenner shot him a warning look, and Carlo worried he'd stepped too far out of line. "Just my professional opinion," he said, raising his hands in a placating manner. "Whaddaya want me to do with the body, Boss?"

"Dump it in the Vat," Brenner ordered.

"Sure thing, Boss," said the coroner, pinching the corners of the sheet and drawing them over the swollen looking dummy as the freaky scientist left without another word. Breathing deeply, Carlo gave a quick glance behind him, lifted the telephone off the hook and dialed Geoff Breen's number. He opened a pack of Camels, sticking one in between his lips as he dug in his pocket for a lighter while the phone

rang in his ear. Breen picked up just as Carlo lit the rolled tobacco and took a deep drag.

"Hello?" said a voice, groggy and tired. *Probably just woke up*, Carlo thought.

"Hey, Geoff, it's Carlo. Just calling to let you know I got your package."

"Good," yawned the biochemist.

"I'm taking it home tonight, then I'll open it."

"It's fragile, so *exercise caution when transporting it*," Breen warned, a little too emphatically to hide the fact that they were speaking in code.

"Will do. See ya, Geoff."

"Bye." A clank sounded when Geoff hung up, and Carlo followed suit.

Carlo hoped he didn't look as conspicuous as he felt, because it seemed like very glance cast his way was filled with suspicion. Nothing obvious about him should draw attention; to the casual observer, he was just another commuter in a regular old '82 Ford Sierra, minding his own business. If, by chance, he were pulled over and asked to open the trunk, that however would bring his dangerous and absolutely illegal activities to light. Being found with what appeared to be the body of a dead child in the back of your car was generally a good way to obtain a one-way ticket to prison. The coroner *did* have good reason to be on high alert.

The coroner sighed deeply as he pulled into his driveway. Pulling the key out of the ignition he got out, twisting it in the trunk and popping it open. He lifted the black duffle bag out, marveling at how damned light the kid was. Unhealthy. With a apprehensive glance behind his shoulder, Carlo shut the front door behind him and laid the duffle on the couch. He unzipped it, revealing the naked, limp form of Ten. Gently, he slid the bag out from under him and produced five large syringes out of it. These Carlo set on the coffee

table and left the room, returning with a defibrillator unit. He watched the clear liquid drain from the hypodermic needle into the boy's neck as he eased the plunger down. Ten didn't move; just as Geoff had told him, but Carlo had still half expected to give the kid the second half of the serum then poof, he was alive again. The first serum had been a unique combination of chemicals that shut down bodily functions, yet preserved and fed the tissue to avoid decay. The part Valdes had just given him was epinephrine and some other mixture he'd never heard of to help jump start circulation. When Breen and Harriet originally proposed using both serums to essentially kill and resurrect Ten, Carlo opposed it.

"If you fuck this up, Geoff, we've killed the kid. We're fucking murderers," he'd shouted. But the biochemist was so confident, so sure, that eventually he won the Mexican coroner over. Carlo took a deep breath and placed his hands on the boy's sternum. He counted off the compressions aloud, then pausing to tilt Ten's head back, pinch his nose shut and cover his mouth with his own. The small chest rose, then fell again with each breath pushed into his deflated lungs. Sweat trickled down the back of Carlo's neck as he switched back to compressions, then breaths. He glanced at the clock. Two minutes, and no response. He grabbed another syringe and stuck it into the boy's neck, firing up the defibrillator. The machine whined to life. Carlo charged it to two Joules, rubbing the paddles together.

"Clear," he called to himself, always wanting to say it like it the movies. Ten's body arched, then collapsed back onto the sofa. "Dammit," he swore, bending the thin ribs with more urgency. More breaths. A third shot of epinephrine. Another attempt at defibrillation, this time at four Joules. Time ticked away, chances of the boy's survival ebbing with it. Continued CPR. Another syringe gone. Six joules.

"Come on!" bellowed the coroner, growing desperate. "I know you're in there, kid. You gotta -wake-up!" He pounded on the small chest. A sharp gasp, and the blue eyes flew open, seeming to crackle with electricity. Carlo laughed, more than a little relieved. "You really had me scared there for a minute, kid."

3. Rebel, Rebel/Hooky Feelings

Notes for the Chapter:

Oy, peoples!

Please remember to comments your criticisms! Tell me what I did well! Tell me what needs to be improved!

I hope you like my little Guild of Rogues and Misfits. And the Hammond fam. Cause in all honesty, I quite adore them.

*Also, I think you'll enjoy this chapter most if you listen to Rebel, Rebel by David Bowie. :)

Love, peace and lots of Led Zeppelin,

~Chorkie

November 5, 1983

Most kids at Poppiesville Middle School knew better than to mock, tease or in anyway do anything slightly offensive to the notorious Jessica Hammond. Or anyone in the Guild of Rogues and Misfits, really. But if there was one girl in all of Poppiesville that lick nearly every student, it was her. Vladimir Leonid knew that well; he himself had quite a reputation as the four-foot-seven giant. However, the first time he came head to head with Hammond, he'd left with a beating he'd remember for a lifetime. Granted, he had dished out his own punishment, sending Jessie home with a black eye and missing two teeth(which Vlad wore around his neck as a memento). The two legends, formerly arch enemies, were inseparable from that day on.

Nearly every person between the ages of seven and fourteen in a twenty mile radius had heard of the fabled Jessie who was said to be able to give even the biggest, meanest high schooler a run for his money. Paulie Malone, to put it politely, was a few fries short of a happy meal. Unfortunately for him, he was blessed with

disproportionate amounts of *chutzpah*, as some people lacking a little meat between the ears often are. Catcalling possibly the world's most rabid twelve year old fell under the category of: YOU MORON WHAT WERE YOU THINKING. Nevertheless, Paulie had followed through with his fatal urge.

Vlad watched bemusedly as the good-looking but idiotic boy walked over to Jessie's locker, looking her up and down admiringly: his first mistake. Rule Number One for not getting the shit beat out of you by Jessie Hammond was don't look at her like she's a girl. Doesn't matter that she's buff and cute, don't do it. Paulie got lucky. Jessie didn't seem to notice this time. She was preoccupied with shoving books into her backpack, a little viciously. He strolled by, smacking her butt and casually moving forward. From then on all the other rules were more broken than the moron's face was about to be. Jessie whipped around, her eyes blazing.

"You got a death wish, Malone?" she growled, baring her snaggle-toothed snarl. Paulie feigned shock.

"Who, me?" Jessie dropped her backpack. Vlad must've blinked, because the next thing he saw was Jessie on top of Paulie, pounding away at his face and swearing like a sailor. He almost felt bad for the moaning and pleading idiot clutching his groin.

Next to Vlad, Mister Pickle snickered. He turned to the drastically shorter boy and said, "You'd think by now every shithead who knew anything'd know better than to hit on her."

"Naw," said Vlad, "There's never a shortage of dumbasses. Besides, Poppiesville's gotta have something worth getting exciting over." Jessie got to her feet and frowned down at the red stains on her clothes.

"Dammit, got blood on my new dress," she grumbled, shaking her golden hair flowing loose around her shoulders. Vlad and Pickle laughed, shouldering their packs and following their friend out gym doorway with the flow of after school traffic. They stopped under the eaves of the building to grab their bikes.

"That was righteous," Vlad told Jessie, his signature smirk wide. "I

don't think Paulie'll be having any kids."

"No shit," the lanky Asian boy cackled, a little manically.

"Like he could get a wife anyway," the girl snorted. "His face is history."

Pickle sighed happily swung a long leg over the seat of his bicycle. "Where we headed?" Jessie looked up at the sky, dark and heavy with rain clouds, thunder crashing in the distance.

"Let's go to my place. It's closest, and pretty soon it'll be raining like hell." She glanced at her bloodstained dress, sharply contrasting against the light blue. "Plus, I want to change before Deb gets home and sees this."

"Sounds good. Last one there's a wrinkled penis!" Pickle shouted, pedaling away. The other two sped off after him, shouting insults over the sound of rain hitting the pavement in heavy sheets, and thunder clapping. They raced down the wet streets, Vlad and Jessie pulling into the lead. The air was chilly, and tore through their soaked clothes like soggy napkins. Vlad was panting, legs beginning to tire from the continued exertion. Wind whipped his woolly curls around his head like a short mane and screamed in his ears as he sped up to the Hammond house, kicking the stand and lifting it up onto the small porch. He smirked over his shoulder as Jessie and Pickle rounded the corner, neck and neck to avoid being dubbed said 'wrinkled penis.' Jessie put on a burst of speed, riding up into the Hammond driveway and coming to a halt.

"Aw, come on!" called Pickle, deflated. Jessie's face broke into a wide, snaggletoothed grin.

"You said it, you wrinkled penis," she taunted.

"Bag your face," the tall boy muttered, rolling to a stop. "I was going easy on you."

"Bull," Vlad said matter of factually. Pickle glared at him, and dismounted. Jessie opened the front door and stepped inside. Vlad went to follow her when *THWACK!*

"What's your damage?" he demanded, whirling around as a mudball splattered against the back of his neck, and dripping down his shirt. Pickle launched another deadly projectile, hitting his pint sized friend in the chest.

"MUDWAR!" roared Jessie, diving through the doorway and shoving aside Vlad, who dropped his backpack and took off after her.

"I'm gonna get you, you sons of-OOF" Pickle's battle cry was cut off by Jessie's body slamming into his, taking him to the ground. He flailed clumsily under her weight as she heaped piles of muck onto him. Vlad crept behind the brawling two with his shirt filled, dumping it on top of Jessie's head and massaging it into her hair.

"Vladimir Leonid, you little-" She turned her head into a faceful of mud.

The Russian boy took off, dodging trees and whooping loudly, "Kiss my ass, Hammond!"

The girl scrambled to her feet and chased after him with a vengeance, mud dripping from her like she was some sort of mire beast. Pickle followed with his long, awkward stride. The vertically challanged friend ahead of them faced them cocklily, running backwards. "That all you got?" The coy expression disappeared from his face as his foot snagged on a tree root, replaced by a look of comic distress. He pinwheeled his arms and fell ass-over-elbow onto the sludge. Jessie dropped to her knees, howling madly alongside Pickle, with tears streaming down their pinched faces.

"Shut up," he grumbled, sitting up and glaring at them sulkily. "It wasn't that funny."

"Don't-be a pussy, it sure-as hell was," gasped Pickle between hiccuppy laughs. The corners of Vlad's mouth twitched, and he tried(and failed) to hold back an indignant guffaw. They sighed in unison, sending them into another fit of hysterical giggles. Finally, Vlad got to his feet. He offered Mister Pickle a hand and pulled him up. The trio trudged through the slick, sinking mud back toward the Hammond house, their arms slung across each other's necks and shoes squelching loudly.

"Oh shit," Vlad breathed, stopping in his tracks.

"What?"

"Our books," he elaborated, grey eyes wide. "They'll be wetter than Noah's flood by now!" Pickle moaned loudly.

"It'll be okay," Jessie said confidently, "Deb will help us figure something out."

"Yeah," said the lanky boy, face brightening, "Good ol' Deb. Hey, there she is now." He pointed to a figure on a bicycle riding up onto the narrow driveway. "Hi, Deb!" The teenager turned her head, short hair tucked under a beanie.

"Hey, Jessie, Vlad, Xiang Wei," she called back, smiling at the mud covered crew. Hardly anyone called Xiang Wei by his given name; most people mistakenly called him John Wayne, or completely botched his name altogether. The Guild had opted to simply refer to him by his favorite food, ergo, he became Pickle.

"Hi Deb," Vlad greeted.

"How'd your game go?" asked Jessie.

Deb gave a pained half smile. "We lost 20 to thirteen."

Jessie returned her grimace. "Ouch."

"Yeah." The older girl looked them up and down. "Get ambushed or something?"

"Naw, Pickle started it," said Vlad.

"Well, you're certainly not going inside like that, all covered in shier, crap," said Deb, adopting what Jessie called her 'mom face;' it was quickly swept away by a mischievous, good natured grin. "You'll need to get cleaned up. I'll hose you guys off, then you can dry in the garage. Just let me put the bikes away." She disappeared inside the house. The garage door started to open, revealing a neat auto workspace and a couch, as well as Deb. Tossing a few towels on the sagging sofa, she turned to the filthy kids.

"Line up," she ordered, and twisted the hose valve, spraying them with the frigid, icy water. They shivered and huddled close together, their teeth chattering like those freaky wind up denture toys. Deb had them turn around a few times to get their backsides, then got to work on Jessie's hair. After a quick inspection, she declared the trembling boys and girl clean, and sent them into the garage to dry off. Deb vanished into the house again, retrieving sets of clothing the boys had left at the Hammond's after sleepovers and such. They gratefully accepted these and changed in the garage while Jessie went inside.

Deb poked at the fire absentmindedly as the Rogues crowded around it, rubbing their hands and warming them over the flames, pausing occasionally to flip the pages of the soaked text books. With a sigh she got up, walking into the kitchen and opening the barren cupboards. Her brow drew together. *I guess it's rice and beans for dinner tonight; for the fifth time in a row.* Money had always been tight in the Hammond household. Poverty wasn't something new to them. But the past year and a half, ever since-

Don't think about that, she told herself, biting her lip. As of late, there was always something popping up that demanded extra spending. They were always left barely making it by to the next paycheck. Uncle Buck already worked two jobs and Deb worked late nights on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, as well as Saturday mornings. Luckily, Coach Jake had rescheduled Basketball practice to weekend evenings so she could attend. Basketball was the one thing that kept her sane. It was a team effort: no one person won by themselves. Each player knew their position and could perform it efficiently. No one held the fate of the game on their own shoulders. That was what basketball was about to her. And Coach was taking his promise to Deb very seriously: if she wanted on the team, she had to work her ass just as hard as the rest of the guys. No special favors or any leeway because she was a girl, nothing. That was the deal. So far, both Jake and Deb had kept their ends up. Coach let her on the team and helped her hide the fact that she wasn't actually David Hammond, Poppiesville' Coons' leading shooting guard.

It was pure heaven. Even if it meant shin splints, jammed fingers and sprained ankles; early morning homework sessions, missing out on

jazz band, and a myriad of other sacrifices.

Plus . . . It gave her a little extra time to admire the team's point guards, Parker Montgomery. Deb's stomach fluttered a bit. Over half of the small community off Poppiesville speculated that Deb was queer, because of her short hair that no matter what managed to look boyish, and her involvement with the basketball team. Maybe she would have been, if she hadn't met Parker in fifth grade. Since then, she had eyes only for him. *And lately*, she thought with a coy smile, *he'd been noticing her.*

"Eat shit!" came the roar from the other room, followed by a loud moan of defeat as Jessie's Rock 'em Sock 'em robot's head shot upward. Mister Pickle scooped the pile of pennies and nickels into his own horde eagerly, running them through his fingers.

"I'm rich, bitches!" he cackled. Vlad watched with an amused smirk, pulling Pringles out of the canister one by one.

"Bag your face, dipshit. I was just going easy on you," Jessie said sulkily. Vlad snorted, and received a punch in the arm.

"You're up, V-Lad," said Pickle.

The Russian boy cracked his knuckles and rolled his neck. The two competitors put their Annie in, fifty cents.

Pickle's eyes drifted to his stack of loot, then to Vlad's dwindling stash. His face twisted into a sly smile. "All in," he said, shoving his mountain into the center. Vlad narrowed his eyes. "You gonna fold?" Pickle taunted.

"In your dreams. All in." Jessie popped a chip into her mouth, observing intently like a chess master watches a particularly tricky match. The boy's gazes locked. They gripped the controls.

"Ready, set, GO!"

Both Vlad and Pickle had vastly different styles. The half Chinese boy wildly jerked his robot around, throwing punches haphazardly. Vlad only advanced to attack a few times, mostly dodging and maneuvering. A sudden cry of victory followed a wail of defeat, and

it took Jessie a moment to figure out which came from which. Triumphant whoops sounded from Vlad, and he raked in his booty. Pickle bemoaned his lost cash. Jessie sat by passively, munching on her snack.

Deb appeared in the doorway, chuckling. "Alright, gambling's done for the day. You guys should start heading home. Jessie has homework to do," she said, with a pointed look at her sister.

"Yeah," agreed Pickle. "My mam threatened to cut my hair if I didn't get my history essay done on time."

He stroked his overgrown bowlcut protectively. Vlad grinned. "In that case, I'm going to kidnap you. You're the only person who actually *likes* it."

Deb laughed. "That's true," she pointed out. The Guild of Rogues and Misfits exchanged goodbyes, the two boys cycling toward home.

With a sigh, Deb set herself back to the task of dinner, reheating the black beans and steaming the rice. She hummed along to the Rolling Stones' *Let's Spend the Night Together*, measuring out a cup and a half of water and pouring it into a heavy, cast iron pan along with the rice. Stirring the beans absentmindedly, she noticed he hadn't heard a word from her sister since Vlad and Pickle left. Deb peeked her head into her's and Jessie's room, only to find it vacant. When she saw the room next to it was open, her eyebrows drew together. On the dusty bed the girl sat, the lower half of her face buried in a navy sweater. Deb's stomach panged. She lowered herself onto the bed next to her. The vacant stare didn't waver.

"I miss him," she whispered, barely audible, and Deb felt herself boiling. She hated what this was doing to her sister. Jessie was loud and boisterous and crazy, not quiet and heavy hearted. Taking a deep breath into the sweater, she soaked up the lingering scent of their lost brother.

"I do too," Deb said softly, her eyes drifting around the poster covered walls, decorated with the Celtics, specifically Dennis Johnson, and various NBA jerseys. On the rough, aged desk was an open textbook, varnished with a year and a half's worth of dusk. Stacks of baseball

cards sat untouched in plastic cases. Everything was *exactly* how John Paul left it. It was almost like he'd never gone at all, like at any moment he would walk in and finish his assignment at his workspace, or sort through his trading cards, smiling fondly as he told each one's story.

Neither Deb nor Uncle Buck dared shift anything around. The last time they'd even tried to dust, Jessie had gotten so upset she locked herself in the vacant room for a full day. Deb knew twins were supposed to share a special bond; she'd seen it herself. Despite how *different* Jessie and John Paul were, despite how much they bickered, despite their different choices of friends, they were inseparable, in a way. They balanced each other out. John Paul was charismatic and sweet and noble, Jessie was rambunctious and loud and tough. Nevertheless, they had something that nobody quite understood.

John Paul's death had been hard on all the Hammonds. He, Jessie, Deb and Uncle Buck had been *family* together; happy. Uncle Buck loved the three kids like his own. Whenever they needed help with homework, or a ride, or just someone to hang out with, Buck was there. Losing John Paul had been a heavy blow to them all.

Still, Jessie felt it differently. As naturally feisty as she was, things that never bothered her before ignited her anger. Outbursts became commonplace, but gradually gave way something that scared the hell out of Deb and Buck, far more than the fits of rage. She became more reclusive, closed off, and her confidence wavered. Hours upon end without any sort of communication. When Vlad and Pickle were around, she was, for the most part her normal self. But John Paul was their best friend too. And they saw the change in Jessie's behavior. They steered clear of the subject, and were sensitive to her needs. Deb couldn't ask for a better group of friends to support her mourning sister. She had seen the concerned looks pass between them, witnessed the schemes to cheer their fellow Rogue up. Jessie never let them see just how much she was hurting.

Deb's eyes brimmed with tears. *Keep it together, Hammond*, she ordered herself, snaking an arm around her sister's shoulders and pulling her into an embrace. The girl didn't resist or give in, just sat silently. Her cheeks glistened, and her hazel eyes, normally vibrant, seemed muted.

"Hello, my dears! I'm home!" boomed a voice from the living room, followed by a loud slam of the front door. Both girls remained where they were, entranced, until the bear like, lumbering figure of their uncle blocked the doorway. A soft light came into his eyes, but was quickly driven out by cheer and happiness. Deb and Jessie stood, now grinning. The huge man wrapped them both in his thick arms, growling playfully. They giggled. Neither could feel melancholy or afraid for very long in the warm, strong embrace of Uncle Buck.

"How are you, my loves?" he said, letting them go and planting a rough kiss on each with a loud smack of his lips. The grizzled beard scratched and tickled Deb's face.

"I lost my game today," said the older girl sadly, fitting her petite hand into the massive paw, thick and calloused from a lifetime of work. "But I scored four three pointers, so that was nice."

A fond smile lifted the man's beard. He gave her a wink. "Good for you, sweetheart. Did that Montgomery boy have the sense to notice?"

"Uncle Buck," Deb protested, earning a deep, rumbling laugh from him.

"What've you been up to, missie?" he asked Jessie.

"I kicked Paulie Malone's ass into tomorrow," she announced with a snaggletoothed grin. Uncle Buck beamed at them both, bright and warm as a summer day.

"My, my," he chuckled, "What I've missed. What's for supper, Debbie dear? I'm starved."

The Hammonds ate in contented conversation, Uncle Buck sharing stories from his childhood, and odd things he'd overheard at work. The night was filled with laughter, by far making up for the slightly unsatisfied emptiness in their stomachs. When their talk lulled, a subtle darkness fell over Uncle Buck's ruddy face.

"Sometimes," he said, staring at his bowl, "I get this hooky feeling in

my gut, and it makes me feel restless, uncomfortable." He paused to load his spoon and bring it to his mouth. "I've learnt to pay attention when to that feelin'. It's a warning that something very bad is about to happen. Got that hooky feeling the day your momma and daddy got killed, all those years ago, may they rest in peace. It was botherin' me the drive to Kerly County, where John Paul died, may he rest in peace. And for the past day and a half, that hooky feeling's been plaugin' me." The deep brown eyes had lost their twinkle, now looking at Jessie and Deb gravely. Filled with worry. "I'm afraid something terrible is gonna happen."

"We should pray," Deb said quietly, after a few seconds of grim silence. Uncle Buck nodded, and took both of the girl's hands.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our tresspasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the power and the glory, forever, Amen."

Uncle Buck continued. "Lord, we thank you for your new mercies every mornin'. Thank you for the gift of family and friends, for a roof over our heads and for food in our bellies. I ask You now, Father God, that you would protect and guide us, as well as those we hold dear. We love You, Lord, and ask these things in Jesus name,"

"Amen," they chorused. The bearlike man gave them a tiny smile, but Deb saw the fear in his eyes remain.

4. Solitaire and Visions/The Weirdo's Escape

Notes for the Chapter:

AN: THE PLOT THICKENETH!!! I'm excited to post this chapter. It has been one of favorites to write so far. Enjoy some Ten and Carlo fluffiness.

A big round of applause to *preciousbean and *blacksatinpointeshoes for giving me your thoughts! I'm glad you're as enamoured with the Guild as I am. Again, my continued thanks for your support.

Cheers,

~Chorkie

November 6th, 1983

"What are you doing?"

Ten hadn't actually vocalized the question, but it hung in the air like a thick fog. The watching blue eyes had been boring a hole in the back of Carlo's neck ever since he'd started this game, and it was more than a little difficult to focus. The coroner sighed, seeing that he'd come to a stalemate. He threw the cards together and shuffled sloppily.

"C'mere," eh said gruffly to Ten, motioning for the boy to come sit by him. "Lemme teach you a card game. Called Solitaire. You lay the cards out like this." Intently, Ten watched him deal the tableau seven in a row, left to right, flipping the last card face up then returning to the first. "The first time you put down seven, the next time six, then five, and so on. The last one always goes face up. Red side goes down, right?" A quick bob of the buzzed head. "Once we got things all dealt out, should look like this," explained Carlo, pointing to the face up row of cards. "Then we can start to play. The goal is to get all the cards in order, by number and with the same symbol. Go ahead, give it a go." Nimble fingers laid them out deftly, exactly as Carlo had shown in him. Ten's brow set in confusion when the Ace of Clubs was

revealed, head tilted to the side.

"Oh, that's an Ace. It works like a one. You put that down here," said the man. Without hesitation, he set back to work, picking out moves faster than Carlo could find them . Ten grunted in frustration when he was left with nothing to work with. "It's okay. That happens more often then not. Makes you appreciate winning more than if it happened all the time," he assured, condensing the deck into his hand and giving it a few shuffles. He handed it back to the expectant Ten, who eagerly set out another game. The boy hardly glanced his way when Carlo got up from the couch and announced he was going to make dinner. Carlo smiled and paused in the doorway. Poor kid hardly knew what fun was. Least he could do was teach him a lousy card game. With a sad shake of his head he turned back into the kitchen, pulling ingredients out of the towering white refrigerator. Grated cheese, a can of refried beans, tomatoes, salsa . . . The heavy aroma of spiced ground beef wafted around the house, making Carlo's mouth water. Soon enough, he carried two plates filled with fresh, soft shell tacos out into the living room. He whipped his head around suddenly as the lights blinked out suddenly, then switched back on. Carlo frowned, paused for a second, then continued to put the food down on the dining table. Ten was choosing his next move carefully. Gaze fixed, his hand hovered over the cards intently.

"Hungry?" asked Carlo. The kid didn't respond, didn't move. Panic started to swell in Carlo's stomach. He rushed over to him, shaking him. Ten's body was rigid. Like rigor mortis, flew through the coroner's racing mind. The only sign he was alive was the expanding and collapse of his chest and the fluttering pulse beneath Carlo's thumb. "TEN!" he bellowed, jostling the boy harder. A thin line of blood ran down his chin, dripping onto the scattered deck of cards. Nothing was shaking him out of the trance like state. Carlo jumped to his feet and got to the phone, ringing up Breen.

"Come on, come on," he muttered. "Pick up the damned phone, Geoff."

The bone jarring shaking had stopped; Eleven was still screaming as rough hands pulled the globe off her head and hauled her out of the water. She saw Papa's face as he knelt by her, cupping her cheeks in his hands and

speaking to her reassuringly. His voice traveled to her ears, but the words seemed to fall short, droned out by her thoughts crashing into each other and overlapping. Every breath was quick and shallow. Her limbs felt weak. Papa took her by the hand and lead her off the platform toward her escorts. More meaningless sounds. The guards gripped her triceps and pushed her onward, down the hall. Lights blinked and flickered, casting grotesque patterns on the tiled walls. Animalistic fear spread over Eleven; everything was wrong, so wrong. The three turned aside into the girl's chamber. Her eyes flew to every corner of the room, flinching at every disfigured shadow.

"Take off the suit," ordered the stockier man. Eleven gladly took off the soaked, weighted suit and slipped into her hospital gown. The walls were closing in. Something was coming.

Boom. A loud rumbling shook the room. The fluorescent lights switched off, then on again.

"What the -"

Boom. Eleven's heart thudded in her ears. Flick hiss flick hiss. The escorts had drawn their batons, blue electricity arcing across the top.

Boom . Inky darkness. Hellish silence.

"It's here," she breathed. A deformed bulge marred the tiled wall. It stretched, then split apart like broken skin. Two sets of thin, clawlike fingers pried open the tear, and a warped, faceless head emerged. Eleven screamed, and the darkened lights sparked. Her bare feet slapped against the unforgiving ground numbly, her legs straining. She heard the agonized cries of the guards, a blood-curdling roar, and the monstrous footsteps behind her. Throwing a glance over her shoulder she stumbled, falling face first onto a stiff cushion. Lifting her head, she uttered a strangled cry. Eleven shoved herself off the bloodied corpse and scrambled to her feed. Bodies were strewn haphazardly across the floor. With her lungs burning, she leapt over them and darted deeper into the intricate maze that was Hawkins Lab. Tears of relief streamed down her face when the outside breeze flowed through an open doorway, guarded by only a still, prone figure. She blinked, then stopped in her tracks, heart faltering.

The towering creature took a slow step toward her, blank face unfurling

like some sort of carnivorous flower. Eleven stood still. The thing hissed, toxic spittle flying around the girl. Her brow creased, and it flew against the concrete wall. Its ear shattering roar rebounded back to Eleven. Her ears rang like amplified static. She dashed by the monster into the biting night air, whipping her head around wildly. Tall chain link fence surrounded her, with darkened watch towers at each corner. Eleven sprinted toward the enclosure. She reached for it, then sharply drew her hand back. Despite her poor ability to read, she knew the words 'Caution,' and 'Electric,' and recognized the warning sign zip tied to the metal links. If the power was well and truly out like it seemed, it wouldn't shock her. Her confidence growing, she dropped to the ground and crawled under, the twisted ends of wire digging into her back like claws groping for her, trying to pull her back into her lifelong prison. A panicked glance over her shoulder made her heart drop. The beast was lumbering toward Eleven viney, plant-like limbs stretching toward her. It was her last look. She sprinted into the woods blindly, never once turning back.

She was free.

For now.

"Geoff, the kid's frozen, he won't move or look at me or respond in anyway. What the hell am I supposed to do?!" demanded the coroner, gripping the phone in his hands tightly.

"Slow down, Valdes. What's happening?" came the muffled reply. Carlo took a shaky breath.

"He's just staring into space. I shook him, called his name, pinched him. Nothing."

"He must be having one of his astral projection episodes," reasoned Geoff.

"Astral what now?"

"He's in someone else's body. They must be far away if he won't respond at all."

"So what do I do?"

"Just wait it out. It should pass in a few minutes."

"And if it doesn't?" Carlo pressed.

Geoff didn't answer right away. "I don't know," he confessed. Carlo barked a mirthless laugh.

"For a genius, you don't know how to handle much, do you? Wait- I think he's coming around." The coroner dropped the phone, hurried to the kid's side and checked his pulse again.

Ten gasped. His unfocused vision fixed on the worry twisted face of Carlo. The dark skinned man sighed, rubbing his forehead and speaking briefly into the phone before hanging up. Ten slowed his shallow breathing and wiped the blood off his mouth.

"Dammit, kid, you really scared me there," said Carlo, handing the boy a napkin and pushing the full plate of food his way. He left his untouched. He'd lost his appetite. "Eat up," he told Ten. Carlo was graced with a small smile of thanks, then Ten's attention was turned to the tacos. He ate ravenously, his eyes watering as the warm meat mingled with the heated salsa, crisp lettuce and cold tang of sour cream. This strange meal, wrapped in thick, off white paper stuff was by far the best thing ever to pass his lips. The first three tacos were gone within a minute. Still, he was wolfinng more down like he'd never eat again.

"It tastes better if you actually chew," Carlo chuckled, just now starting on his second. Ten froze, gazing up at him questioningly with his mouth hanging ajar, and food raised to it. The coroner laughed, and a grin cracked on the solemn face. The kid might've not had a clue what the man was talking about, but the sound of Carlo's easy laugh made him feel warm and fluttery inside. All thoughts of his vision were banished, at least for now. Ten looked at the tattooed arms, the greasy, slicked back hair, the goateed face and decided that this was a good person. No one had cared this much for him. No one had given so much and asked for nothing in return. There was no task to complete, no trick to perform, or punishment if he failed. Tears welled in his vision, a kind he never knew were possible. Tears

of gratitude.

"Thank you," he whispered, sincerity radiating from his eyes searching Carlo's. It was the coroner's turn to feel warm and fluttery.

Carolyn Weiss brushed the dark, overgrown curls from her son's forehead with the back of her hand, smoothing the soft skin. She planted a gentle kiss there. Her bony fingers lingered in his silky hair, cherishing the full head of it that belonged to her all-but-gone child, while she, in full possession of herself, was stripped of it. Not often did she indulge in self pity, but she truly longed for the days when she herself still had long, reddish brown locks that didn't fall out in handfuls. The chemotherapy had come at a cost. And all it had done was extend her misery filled days.

The boy lay there impassively. His green eyes drifted around the room at random, and spittle trickled out of his open mouth onto his pillow. A soft wheezing sound came with each breath, due to the various tubes in his nose and airways, keeping his lungs fed with oxygen.

"Timothy," Carolyn whispered, more to hear what was once her son's name more than to talk to him. Time and time again, the doctors had told her that Timothy was as good as dead, and only his shell remained. Still, Carolyn refused to wholly accept this, even after a year and a half of seeing her sweet boy waste away. His soul was not only gone, but his body decaying as well. He was the last tie she had to her former life: a life with her husband Markus, and their two beautiful girls, Miranda and Shannon; a life where Timothy was healthy and whole; a life where Carolyn still knew joy. If Tim were completely gone, she would altogether forget. Perhaps it was selfish, but it was the only thing that kept her hanging on.

In her will, Carolyn had written to remove her son from life support the day she died; *that wouldn't be long now*, she mused to herself with a body wracking cough. So, she spent as much time with Timothy as possible, lavishing love and care on him, whether he was there or not.

"I love you," she said softly, taking a last look at his blank face before leaving the room and heading upstairs to bed.

Tony flicked the end of his cigarette, sending ashes flying. He took a last deep drag, exhaling out a cloud of smoke into the shrill air. The overcast sky was illuminated by a nearly full moon shining down peacefully, softly touching the small town of Poppiesville. It was relatively quiet, except for the occasional car passing by and the steady song of crickets and cicadas. Checking his watch, he dropped the butt to the pavement and ground it with the toe of his shoe, heading back inside the theatre lobby.

"Tony," said a nasal, crackly voice. The young man rolled his eyes and turned to the speaker.

"Yeah, Boss?"

The heavy-set manager peered over his glasses at the employee, emphasizing the greasy food left on his chin.

"Quit slacking and get to work, got it? I don't have time for you to be draggin' your ass all the time."

"Just taking my smoke break, Boss," replied Tony. Josephs snorted, and it was anything but becoming.

"Smoke break my ass. You've been out there for a fucking half hour, wasting my damn time. Get moving," he ordered.

Tony grit his teeth, thinking of Chad and Marie, who were probably doing a whole *different kind of work* in the auditorium. As much as he didn't want to interrupt their boinking, he wanted to get back to his apartment at a reasonable time. "Sure, Boss," he muttered, grabbing a vacuum and towing it behind him as he headed down to the viewing room. Opening the door, he found the room pitch black except for the green glow from the exit signs.

"Chad, Marie," he called, and heard groaning in reply. Tony grimaced. "I'm gonna turn the lights on in ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ." Breathed swearing and fumbling came from between the rows. ". . .

One." The lights flicked on, revealing two flushed, disheveled teenagers. Chad's slacks were unzipped, and Marie's blouse was lopsidedly buttoned, leaving a very large gap in the center. Tony coughed. "Anyway, it'll be best if we got to work instead of screwing around," he said pointedly. "I don't know about you, but I want to keep this shitty job."

"I totally agree," said Chad seriously, grabbing his trash can and sticking his hands into gloves.

"The lower half's been picked up," Marie told Tony, more than a little embarrassed. With a sigh, Tony got to work, plugging in his vacuum and running it over the vermillion carpet, picking up pieces of popcorn and whatnot.

The three worked in productive and or awkward silence for a while, and Tony started to relax. He liked vacuuming. It droned out the world and helped him not think about all the shit going on around him, at least for the time being.

The lights flickered, and the whining of the vacuum faltered for half a second. "What was that?" asked Marie, a little frightened.

"Dunno," said Chad, scratching his acne covered face in an unconcerned manner. They resumed their efforts. The monotonous hum of the machine calmed their slightly frazzled nerves and settled them into a productive rhythm once again.

Darkness fell upon the auditorium. The vacuum came to a complete stop. Tony grunted, and waited for the generator to kick on while his fellow workers fell into a minor panic. He clicked on his mini flashlight and shone it around the room. It wasn't much. Just a dinky dollar store key chain flashlight, but it was something.

"You two stay here," he ordered the frightened lovers. "I'll reset the breaker. A circuit probably blew or something. Just stay put." They nodded, a little fearfully.

Tony walked up the aisle, out the door and into the hall. He frowned. The evacuation lights ran on battery. So why were they off? It gave him an uneasy feeling, one he wasn't able to shrug off as he

continued down the corridor, lit only by his flashlight. In the lobby, behind the front desk was the breaker panel. He popped it open and flipped the individual switches off, then hitting the main breaker off, on again, off, on again. He proceeded to reset the single breakers. Nothing changed. *Weird. The generator should have kicked in by now.*

The hair on the back of his neck stood at attention, and a prickly feeling started to creep over his skin. *It's just the cold*, he told himself. He made his way briskly back to the auditorium, wholly uneasy. Stepping in, he examined the silence guardedly.

"Chad? Marie?" Tony called. "You guys better not be screwing again." No reply. He shone his light around the room, illuminating only empty seats. "Come on, this isn't funny. I can't get the power back on, and Josephs is MIA. We gotta leave and call the power company." Dead, still silence. Tony shuddered.

"Guys?" he repeated, searching the rows of chairs. Panic sprouted in his mind like germinated fear. "Chad? Marie?" His pulse was too quick for comfort. *They're just messing with me*, he told himself, swallowing his discomfort. "No, no, come on," he muttered, as his mini flashlight faded, then died. He smacked it a few times and unscrewed the it to check the battery. "Fuck," he breathed, when the slipped from his trembling hands and rolled away to who knows where. He groped around for them desperately. Every hair on his body stood on end. Something warm and wet dripped onto his shoulder. It sizzled on his shirt, burning a hole in it and biting into his skin. A low hiss came from above. Tony's heart stopped, sinking into his gut like a stone in water. Slowly, he turned, eyes lifting upward. Two dripping fangs hovered above him, waiting.

Tony screamed.

And then he was gone.

5. Awry

Notes for the Chapter:

Oy, peoples!

Please remember to comments your criticisms! Tell me what I did well! Tell me what needs to be improved!

This chapter's a little shorter. But the next one will be coming soon, so fear not.

Love, peace and lots of Led Zeppelin,

~Chorkie

November 7, 1983

A particularly obtrusive gust of wind rustled the frazzled Parker Montgomery's dark hair. Shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose, he shut the door behind him. Books threatened to spill out of his full arms like a litter of squirmly puppies. He shrugged his satchel to the ground and unzipped it hurriedly, shoving the notebooks into it and draining the last of his coffee. The boy swung a leg over the seat of the rundown bike and pedaled off with a yawn. Shrill, pre-dawn air whistled in his ears and ignored the scratchy wool sweater he wore. Steam billowed out of his nostrils in a cloud, fogging his glasses. Parker cast a rushed glance at his watch, and pedaled faster toward the downtown area. He ran through his mental list of homework assignments he hadn't completed yet, swearing under his breath. Normally, he was well organized, and had things done in advance. Today was not one of those days.

Soon, the small community theater pulled into view, surrounded by police cars and officers swarming around like uniformed, oversized ants. Red and blue lights flashed brightly in the early morning dark, and radios chattered and beeped around the young reporter. Parker coasted into the parking lot, hopping off and pulling a small tape recorder from his bag.

"Parker Montgomery, at five thirty-two a.m on Monday, the seventh

of November, 1983. At Poppiesville Community Theater, investigating possibly a homicide." He approached a squat black man with stringy hair combed over his bald head; but he had a mustache thick enough to make up for his nearly bare scalp. His face immediately soured when his heavy lidded eyes lit upon Parker.

"Good morning, Chief O'Donnell," greeted the teen.

"Is it now?" came the weary sigh.

"What's the deal? Possible homicide?"

"Double," O'Donnell confirmed, placing his meaty hands on his hips. "The manager, Rodney Josephs is in the hospital, in a comatose state. Leading suspect is Anthony Schultz. Went missing last night."

"Any idea on motives?" The chief shook his head, bushy eyebrows drawing together.

"Nope. He simply vanished. Didn't steal anything, didn't leave a weapon, didn't even take his car." O'Donnell looked eager to leave the conversation. "You want more information go talk to Denton," he said, jerking his head over to a tall officer conversing with forensics personnel.

"Thanks, Chief," said Parker, giving a two fingered salute and squeezed through the crowd of uniformed men. "Officer Denton." The man turned to face the much shorter boy. "I'm Parker Montgomery, with the *Poppiesville Current Events*. What can you tell me about the victims?"

"Not much," said Denton, a little loudly. He had an expressive way of talking that Parker found amusing, even if it was a little brusque. "Both Chad MacReady and Marie Pascal were found dead on the viewing room floor." The handsome, animated face twisted in disgust. "Poor kids were practically swimming in their own blood," he said with a shudder. "Bastard who killed 'em literally peeled their damn faces off."

A tingly, prickling sensation broke out on the back of Parker's neck, and he hiked his scarf higher up to ward off the cold. "God, that's

awful," he breathed. Denton nodded, looking green. "What can you tell me about Josephs' condition?"

"Not good," he sighed. "He seems to be paralyzed, frozen. Comatose, but stiff as a board. Doctors got no clue how he got like that."

Parker's mind, for once, was nearly emptied of theories. He shivered. What kind of sick bastard did you have to be to do stuff like that? "What do you think Schultz's motives were?"

The officer chewed his lip. "Personally, I don't think it was Schultz. He was incarcerated a few years ago for substance abuse, but he got out early on good behavior. Just never seemed like the type to me. Quiet fella, kept to himself. I honestly don't know what we're up against. Could be the start of serial killings."

The young reporter could hardly believe it. Poppiesville was just a small hick town of roughly three thousand people, just a tiny blot on the map. It was small even compared to its nearest neighbor, Hawkins. Everybody knew everybody. Everybody shopped at the same stores, all the kids went to same schools. If you didn't know a person, you knew somebody who did.

Shit, thought Parker. *These kids used to go to my school.* He was sure he'd passed them in the halls on a few occasions, given them a brief smile and no thought more.

"Well," he said, after a long silence. "I sure hope whoever did this pays. Good luck." Giving a quick nod to Denton, he turned away and mounted his bike.

"Stay safe, Montgomery," he called after him.

The teenage boy gave him a troubled half smile. "No promises."

Deb groaned loudly and groped for the beeping alarm. Her fumbling hand knocked it off the nightstand. It lay somewhere on the ground, still emitting that *God-awful* tone, albeit muffled. She rolled off the squealing mattress, clumsy fingers putting and end to the loud digital

wail. Sitting on the ground, leaning against the bed frame, she released a sigh and her bleary eyes closed.

"Deb," said a voice, shaking her out of her dozing.

"Hmm?" She started. "I'm awake." Her unfocused gaze fixed on the grinning face of Jessie, whose head was peaked in. The girl's shoulder length hair was messy and disheveled, puffed out in the back.

"Your alarm went off five minutes ago. You weren't up yet, so Uncle Buck sent me to check in on you," said the younger Hammond. Deb muttered something undecipherable and shut the door with her foot. She yawned loudly, getting to her feet and reaching for the ceiling. Her ears popped. The teen rubbed her blurry eyes and dug through her closet, looking for a change of clothes. She grabbed a lightweight teal sweater and a pair of jeans, as well as a set of fresh underclothes. Satisfied, Deb stepped onto the cold linoleum and into the hall, heading for the vacant bathroom.

"I call shower first!" called Jessie, rushing by and slamming the bathroom door behind her.

"Sonofabitch," Deb grumbled, feeling thoroughly sour as she often did before coffee. A loud crash shook her out of her sulking, sounding from the kitchen. She rushed to the scene, and a feeling of dread washed over her. Something was wrong; *very* wrong. Uncle Buck was frozen, a look of horror plastered across his weathered face. He held the phone to his ear, other hand hovering over the shattered porcelain at his feet.

"I . . . Thank you, Jim. Yes . . .Thank you," he said quietly, then gently hung the earpiece back on the hook. He shakily eased himself onto a dining chair, eyes locked on space.

"What happened?" Deb dared to breathe.

"Benny's dead," said Buck, wholly aghast. Tears spilled over his ruddy cheeks, trickling into his beard. "He was found dead this morning. Shot. Police say -suicide." Choked back sobs punctuated the end of his sentence. Deb's heart twisted, like a wrung out sponge. She embraced the lumbering, bear like frame, blinking her tears into the soft fabric

of his flannel. "I - I don't believe it," he muttered, beard brushing his niece's cheek as he spoke. "Benny wouldn't do this. I know my brother. He was happy; content at least. He had family, friends, he loved his work . . . Benny did *not* kill himself." Buck's voice grew louder, almost angry. Deb felt a twinge of fear.

"Something isn't right." The conviction in his broken voice had Deb agreeing.

Something was *definitely* not right.

Carlo's thoughts didn't have enough space between them for him to fully process them. They were like a train, speeding along at breakneck pace, cars blurred into a single line of movement. Harriet's last words to him, maybe her last words at all, buzzed in his head.

RUN, Carlo, they're coming. You don't have much-

Gunshots. A terrified scream. Then silence.

The coroner shook his head frantically as he shoved clothes into a bag, along his wallet and a flashlight. He stuck a loaded Bren Ten into the waistband of his jeans, near the small of his back. Rushing out of the bedroom and into the living space, he saw Ten pacing like a caged animal, sensing the urgency, not not having a clue as to what the danger was. Carlo pushed open a slit in the blinds, peering out into the noonday light. His squinting eyes lighted upon the three black sedans that pulled up across the street. He grabbed Ten by the arm and dragged him into the hall, gaze searching the ceiling. Skidding to a stop, he tugged the ring hanging from the cut out square, and it folded down.

"Get up," he ordered, kneeling and offering a leg up to the wide eyed boy. The kid frowned and shook his head, confused. "Put your foot on my hands. I'll boost you." Carlo easily lifted his small frame. Ten hoisted himself into the attic, and the coroner jumped up after him, closing the trap door. Both crouched on the plywood rafters, bracing themselves against the beams. Their labored breaths were deadened in the thick cloud of dust swirling around them.

Ten yelped, and Carlo started.

Thump.

There it was again. That heavy pounding. Muffled shouting followed from the front of the house. Ten yelped when a loud crash sounded as the front door burst. Carlo clamped a sweaty hand over his mouth, holding the terrified boy close. Shallow breaths warmed his hand. His pulse quickened. Shuffled steps hurried around the house, about three or four men, he guessed. A familiar voice hit the coroner's ears, ordering to search the house. Anger surged through Carlo. *Sullivan. That bastard.*

"I'm going up into the attic," said a voice, much clearer than the rest, coming from directly below them. Carlo's heart stopped. He brought his mouth to Ten's ear, whispering into it almost inaudibly.

"When I shoot, stay behind me. Get to the back door and run, run for the train tracks, into the woods. Deep as you can, got it?" The boy swallowed and nodded. Carlo reached back for the pistol, not daring to breathe.

"Cover me," called the voice. The coroner licked his lips and aimed. Light flooded through a crack, and a head peeked through. Carlo fired twice, and the eyes rolled back and the body slumped to the ground. Throwing himself down the gap, Carlo rolled, hugging to the wall as bullets whistled in his ear. Ten dropped down after him once he signaled, Carlo sending short bursts from the smoking Bren Ten.

"Valdes," said a cringy baritone, "Fancy meeting you here." The fugitives whirled around, facing a tall, broad man with meticulously combed, platinum blond hair. A shark-like grin split his handsome features a little too wide, marring them like he'd had some sick plastic surgeon operate on him. Carlo released a volley of shots, only to find his barrel empty. Sullivan clucked at him and shook his head, grotesque smile never leaving his lips. "Now that's not how you treat an old friend, is it?" The cold eyes turned to Ten, and the boy shuddered. "Well, as I live and breathe. How'd you do it, Carlo? Everybody thinks the kid's dead." The coroner fixed his burning gaze on Sullivan.

"Leave him outa this," he growled. "Do whatever the fuck you want with me, but let him go."

The security guard shook his head sadly. "No can do. Dr. Brenner will be quite displeased if I return with news that, oh wait, the boy isn't dead, he's run off. I'll kill him first," he spat, the malice in his eyes finally spilling out like venom. "Get on down, and put your hands behind your head." Carlo held his glare, but obeyed. "You too," Sullivan pointed to Ten. "Price, get in here." Another thick man, armed with a sawn off shotgun entered. He gave Carlo a quick pat down, taking the backpack and searching through it.

"You," Sullivan said, jerking his neck behind him. "Over here." Ten flinched as the end of the gun was pointed at him. Tentatively, he moved to where the man pointed, electric eyes watching. "Face down, on the ground." The boy turned his head to the side, then felt it grind into the carpet as a heavy foot was placed there. "Don't move an inch, or Price here'll blow your legs off," Sullivan warned in Ten's ear. His pulse raced. The head of security's hot breath smelled of smoke and wintergreen. "I don't need your limbs. All I need is your head intact." He tapped Ten's skull. "Okay?"

"Okay," he squeaked. He released the pressure, and Ten released a pent up breath. The blond haired man walked over to the kneeling Carlo, turning his back to Ten.

"Sorry you gotta go this way, Valdes," Sullivan said apologetically, fitting the barrel of the gun under the coroner's chin.

"No," said Ten, chest heaving. "Carlo." Sullivan went rigid, and the shotgun dropped from his hands, rattling to the floor. Carlo's pupils dilated as blood trickled from Sullivan's ears and eye sockets, and he slumped backward. Dead. Fast as lightning, he scooped up the weapon and fired at Price, who stumbled with a loud cry. Ten felt like his body was spinning, or falling out of control. He felt rough hands hoist him up and pull him to his feet. Carlo threw open the back door and stepped out, blasting the two unsuspecting intruders. Ushering Ten out, adrenalin coursed through his veins like fire. He hugged the wall and peeked around the corner. His hand gripped Ten's shoulder tightly, eyes burning into the terror filled blue, sparking.

"Listen; when I turn that corner, run straight for the tracks. Don't let them see you. If you can see the cars, they can see you. Ready?" The buzzed head bobbed, but Ten felt dizzy and heavy and hazy.

"On my mark." Ten's heart hammered in his chest, threatening to burst. His body shook violently, and he was sure he was going to vomit.

"Ready." His stomach heaved. He held it back.

"Set." Carlo quickly crossed himself, sending up a quick prayer.

"GO!" Ten's gut lurched, and he took off like a bullet from the coroner's gun, bare feet pounding against the soft earth. Long grass whipped at his calves, and the wind screamed in his ears like a bloodthirsty beast. It was almost louder than the second heartbeat in his skull, blood thundering. He heard gunshots behind him, and threw a glance over his shoulder. Carlo was a few hundred feet behind him, turning periodically to shoot down anyone who dared follow them. A loud horn sounded from the train tracks, quickly approaching.

"GET TO THE TRAIN!" bellowed the coroner, putting on a burst of speed. Ten's lungs burned. He pressed on, eyes locked on the train cars rushing by. A rock caught his foot and he stumbled forward, scrambling up. The entirety of his left leg was on fire, from his now bleeding toes to the wound in his thigh. It was taking its toll on him, slowing him down. Breaths came shallow and ragged.

Carlo was starting to catch up. Ten didn't stop when he reached the train. With an overshot leap, he latched on and swung himself into the open compartment, skidding across and nearly slipping off the other side. He collapsed on the planked floor, adrenalin abandoning him like an illusive protector; there when he most needed it, but not a *damned half second longer*. His heaving chest sucked in deep draughts of air as his unfocused eyes stared up at the ceiling.

The coroner sprinted, following the car Ten had jumped into. He launched toward it. The resounding pop of a gun echoed in the valley. He hit the floor with a thud. Ten was run through by fatigue like a semi truck. It lulled him, an irresistible call to close his weary

eyes and sleep. Strength gone, he succumbed to the siren's song.

6. Who Feels A Little Dead Inside?

Notes for the Chapter:

Jeez, it's been a long time since I've updated. I'm sorry. But I'm back at it again!

Question: What happens when the Guild meets Mike, Dustin and Lucas? >:)

Cheers,

~Chorkie

November 11, 1983

Silence hung over the occupants of the full sedan like smoke: thick and heavy and toxic. Deb glanced in the mirror at the three kids smushed in the back seat. Pickle had passed out not long after they left; his cheek was pressed against the window pane, a line of drool trickling down the glass from his open mouth. In the middle sat Vlad, looking uncomfortable in the restrictive dress clothes. He grimaced and pulled at his collar and loosened his tie, like they would choke him if he didn't adjust them every so often. The youngest Hammond, usually talkative and boisterous, stared out at the scenery passing by with a melancholy Deb recognized. She felt a sharp pang in her gut. Anytime the subject of funerals or death came up, Jessie withdrew. Isolated herself. They reminder her too much of what she had lost.

Dammit, it hurt to see her sister like this.

Too many deaths, too close to home. Jessie and John Paul had been too young to remember much about Mom and Dad, but Deb could hardly look at Uncle Buck without her father staring back at her. Both John Paul Hammond Senior and Lacy Webster had been military officers in the Vietnam war. They started seeing each other more often, and Lacy was eventually medically discharged. That's where Deb came into the picture. As soon as John Paul Sr. had leave, he returned to the States and the Hammonds were married. He visited as often as he could, and the twins were the result of it four

years later. Shortly after they had been born, Deb's father died in a mine accident. Lacy's health had sharply declined after John Paul Jr.'s and Jessie's birth, and the loss of her husband took its toll on her. Uncle Buck decided it was time to step in. The Hammonds all lived in one tiny, crowded house, held together by Buck's meagre salary. It wasn't long before Lacy simply wasted away, leaving Jessie, John Paul Jr. and Deb in the care of their uncle.

Deb had moved on; but that didn't mean it stopped hurting. It sure as hell did. John Paul's sudden death had caught them all off guard, wholly unexpected. *Maybe there are no expected deaths in the Hammond family*, Deb wondered grimly. The loss of Mom and Dad had been excruciating, but something about John Paul, something about his zest for life, his boldness, his vibrance, that the loss of him was like the loss of the sun; no matter how many artificial lights you strung up, there was no making up for its absent warmth and glow. It was *impossible* to recover from.

The road started to blur. Deb blinked rapidly, sighing. *Keep it together, Hammond. For them.* But fuck, she missed him. They all did, she knew. Still, each person felt it differently. In his short eleven years, he'd managed to touch everybody he came in contact with in a unique and personal way. Some of Uncle Buck's favorite pastimes were the times spent in silence with John Paul, neither of them saying anything. The spritely, young figure would follow the bear like man without a word out to the truck. The two would get in, simply drive for an hour or more, just enjoying the forested scenery and each other's company. It didn't matter where they went, as long as it was just them. When they returned, despite the myriad of shit going on around them, they always came back tranquil and at peace with themselves.

A wistful half smile crossed Deb's face at the sight of the Guild now all asleep against Vlad, who was snoring softly. This meant Pickle was halfway curled up on top of his head, open mouth dribbling drool onto the Russian boy's dirty blonde, wooly curls. Jessie was slouched low with her head resting on the broad shoulder. They wouldn't be caught dead like that if they could help it. But things like *that* kept happening more and more often after John Paul. The four of them together, Jessie, Vlad, Pickle and John Paul, they had been the

Guild of Rogues and Misfits. They had been close; *very* close before, but now, Deb sensed the vulnerability and fierce protection of each other. Especially with the boys. John Paul had always been the mediator, the peacemaker, the one who kept everybody (specifically Jessie) in check. Now, by some force or another, Vlad and Pickle had a silent agreement to fulfil that role. Deb had seen the knowing looks pass between them.

But Vlad and Pickle weren't always around. And when Jessie got upset, things got messy. Outbursts of anger and screaming, swearing and storming off; things were broken, neighbors were disturbed. The community as a whole saw it. Unfortunately, the outburst grew less common, only to be replaced by that haunted reclusiveness that scared the living hell out of them all.

Deb swallowed the hard knot in her throat, and it went down like a porcupine, quills sticking in her esophagus. *Don't you dare break, Hammond*, she ordered herself. *keep it together. Somebody in this family's got to*. She took a deep breath and released the pent up air. How much longer could she bear this? Her own pain was enough; everybody else merely anchored her to the bottom of the ocean. Where she was drowning.

The kids stirred as Buck eased down on the break. Solemnly, they stretched and filed out of the sedan, each with a long yawn. The chapel was mostly empty, except for a few characters Deb didn't recognize. A tall, broad shouldered man, still dwarfed by Buck, approached them, wearing an officer's uniform. His hair was disheveled, and his eyes were ringed with dark bags. He held a forester's hat in his hands, which he held out to Buck. He shook it somberly.

"Buck," he said, bushy eyebrows drawing together. "Good to see you."

"Jim."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Jim said quietly. "I know things haven't been easy for you or your family in recent years."

"I appreciate it, Hopper," said Uncle Buck, with a small smile. The sheriff shook his head dismissively.

"It's nothing." He drew a long breath and fingered his hat. "After the ceremony, you'll need to go to City Hall to sort out paperwork for Benny's belongings and the restaurant."

"Will do, Hop." The gruff figure started to turn away, but hesitated.

"I gotta get back to the station, then to Joyce's." Buck caught him by the arm, his bearded face distraught.

"Joyce? Joyce Byers? What happened?"

The man's eyes darkened. "We don't know. Her son's body was found in the quarry on Wednesday night. They held his funeral this morning."

"Damn," Buck breathed. "You think she'd mind if I stopped by the reception?"

Hopper shook his head. "Not at all. It's just down the hall. You take care, Buck."

"You too, Hop."

The whole service was a blur to Deb, only random sounds and images managing to wade through the fog in her mind, like how the chaplain only blinked one eye; the simple wooden box that held Benny's ashes; the tears like liquid diamonds hanging on Uncle Buck's silver streaked beard; Vlad's hand intertwined with an ill looking Jessie's.

Numbly, she followed behind the party as they made their way down the halls of the mortuary, their shoes squeaking against the linoleum floor. They turned aside into a reception room filled with soft-spoken comments and mourners. The five of them entered, and were approached by a woman with unruly dark hair and dark circles under her broken eyes, refracting light like shattered glass. Without a word, she stepped into Buck's thick armed embrace.

"Joyce," he started, but not knowing how to finish.

"Buck, I'm so sorry to hear about Benny, and your nephew," said Joyce, pulling away.

"Joyce, I can't even imagine what you're going through--"

"Yes, you do, Buck. You've lost a boy too." Her voice broke, tears spilling out onto her cheeks. Joyce turned her startling gaze on Deb and the Guild.

"These are my nieces, Deb and Jessica, and these are Jessie's friends, Xiang Wei Li and Vlad Leonid," said Buck, clearing his throat.

The woman tried to give them a smile. "Well come on in, and help yourself to some food."

The Rogues grabbed plates and moved toward the food tables, piling them high, then taking a seat. Vlad and Pickle exchanged a worried look. The taller boy elbowed Vlad softly.

"She's doing it again," he whispered, jerking his head toward Jessie staring blankly into space.

"Hey Jess," said Vlad, nodding at her empty plate. She had picked one up, but never actually gotten any snacks. Her muted hazel eyes met his, unfocused.

"Hmm?"

"You don't have any food," he noted.

She gave a shrug. "Not hungry right now."

"Where are you guys from?" asked a voice, young and slightly husky. It came from a freckle faced kid about their age, standing with two others who seemed to be his companions.

"Poppiesville," said Jessie, shaken out of her daze.

The boy frowned. "Where's that?" The Guild shared a weary look. Nobody knew where the hell Poppiesville was.

"It's north of here. Little hick town."

"Do you guys know Will?" lisped a curly haired kid missing half his front row of teeth. He received an elbow from the slim, black guy next to him, and a look that said, *really*?

"No. I think my uncle went to highschool with Joyce Byers," replied Jessie.

"By the way, I'm Mike Wheeler, and this is Dustin and Lucas," he said, motioning to each of them.

"Jessie Hammond."

Dustin's eyes widened. "Hammond? Was Benny Hammond your dad?"

She shook her blonde braids. "No. He was my uncle."

"Oh," said Mike, sheepishly. "I'm - sorry."

Jessie looked down and shrugged.

Lucas nudged Mike's arm. "Look, there's Mr. Clarke. Come on, let's go talk to him."

"Mr. Clarke?"

"Oh," said a kind looking, mustached man, turning around to reply. "Hey there. How you boys holding up?" He gave them a sympathetic smile.

With a quick glance at the curly headed figure bending over the snack table, Lucas spoke. "We're- In mourning," he stated, looking stiff.

"Man, these aren't real Nila Wafers," sighed Dustin, with a sad shake of the head. Pickle glared accusingly at the fake cookies on his plate.

"You want them?" he mouthed to Vlad, shoving them his way. He shrugged.

"Sure. Thanks." He nibbled the edge of one, then frowned. "These are

shit," he muttered, stuffing the rest of in into his mouth. Pickle snorted, spraying a gentleman in a grey suit with crumbs. Deb shot him a withering look and Jessie jabbed him hard in the side.

"Ow," he whined, rubbing his ribs sulkily. The Guild watched the other kids and Mr. Clarke find a seat, all three leaning forward eagerly.

"So you know how in *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan talks about other dimensions? Like, beyond our world?" inquired the freckled boy, twitching his hand excitedly.

"Yeah. Sure. Theoretically," replied Mr. Clarke.

"Right. Theoretically." More emphatic gestures from the Wheeler kid.

"So, *theoretically*, how do we travel there?"

Mr. Clarke have them a knowing, pensive look. "You guys have been thinking about Hugh Everett's many worlds interpretation, haven't you?" Dustin raised his eyebrows, asking Mike a silent question. He shrugged. "Well, basically," continued the man, "there are parallel universes. Just like our world, but just, infinite variations of it. Which means there's a world out there where none of this tragic stuff ever happened."

"Yeah," interjected Lucas, a little impatiently, "that's not what we're talking about."

"Oh."

"We were thinking of more of an *evil* dimension, like the Veil of Shadows. You know the Vale of Shadows?" Dustin crunched on the rest of his pseudo-Nilla Wafer.

"Oh jeez," groaned Vlad. "Nerd alert. They're talking about Dungeons and Dragons."

"They're like the ultimate nerd squad," chortled Pickle, doubling over. Vlad choked on his water, spewing it all over the cookies and all over their dress clothes. Pickle's loud, hiccupy laugh seemed amplified in the sober atmosphere of the room. The 'Nerd Squad' was still

enraptured in their sciencty conversation, but the other occupants of the room shot withering scowls their way.

"What's wrong with her?" asked a little girl, pointing to Jessie, who was no longer in her seat next to them, shaking like a leaf and staring into a framed picture. Tears were coursing down her face, and her breathing was sharp and shallow, like a fish drowning in air. Deb rushed to her side, catching her as she slumped to the floor.

That boy in the picture; it wasn't Will Byers, it was John Paul Hammond. Oh, *fuck*. The pain. It was back. That same, white hot agony she'd felt the instant that car came crashing into John Paul's body, that same dead, decaying, feverish pain she'd felt the moment he left this world. He was dying all over again, and taking Jessie with him. The burning void deep in her chest, the echoed shrieks bouncing around inside her skull, violent wrenching in her stomach; every particle of her being was screaming, every inch of pain was John Paul gone, John Paul dead.

Deb took Jessie's wet, flushed face in her hands. "Jessie, Jessie," I need you to look at me," she ordered. "What's wrong? Where does it hurt?"

"Everything," she sobbed, eyes unfocused and distracted. Deb grunted in frustration. Uncle Buck hurried over and took the small hand in his own.

"We're gonna get you to a hospital, okay?" he soothed. The distressed girl shook her head, not violently, but more in frustration.

"He's- he's gone." Jessie gasped.

Buck turned his worried face to Deb. "You need to take her home. I have to stay in Hawkins for a few days anyway, to sort out finances. I'll call when I'm ready, or catch a ride."

"But-

"Go," he ordered, voice raising.

"Okay," said Deb shakily, taking the keys from his hand. The boys eased the hyperventilating Jessie to her feet and supported her,

guiding her out to the sedan parked outside. Vlad reached up and wrapped an arm around her trembling shoulders, pulling her close.

"We got you, Jessie," he said gently. Deb pulled out of the parking space, turning onto the highway. Gradually, the agonized, shuddering sobs slowed to abrupt, hiccuppy gasps as Jessie drifted off to sleep.

After a while, they stopped at a gas station to call Pickle's mom and update her on plans: the Guild would spend the night at the Li house. Deb thought it might trigger another episode if she were around constant reminders of John Paul. It was safer this way. Another two hours passed, and Deb dropped the three kids off and headed home. She rubbed her eyes, thoroughly exhausted from the emotionally draining day. *I'd better get home soon*, she mused with a yawn. *I'm about to drop.* Thankfully, the Hammond's cabin was only about a mile and a half away, and she made it home shortly. Coasting up into the dirt driveway, she turned the ignition and stepped out into the frigid night air, shivering. Her icy fingers fumbled with the keys, dropping them onto the planked porch. The lock clicked, and the door squealed open. Deb's eyes narrowed, and she shut the door behind her. It was an icebox inside. The heater had been turned off; they *had* expected to be gone for a few days. The house must've just cooled down a lot during the day. Rubbing her hands together, Deb dropped her purse on the couch and fired up the thermostat, setting it to 70 degrees.

"What the—" She froze, concentrating. She could've sworn she'd heard—There it was again. Music. Coming from down the hall. Deb held her breath, reaching under the sagging couch and sliding a loaded shotgun out. Moving slowly, she got to her feet again, holding the firearm at the ready. She navigated the dark room by the light of the moon shining in through the open curtain. Her heart raced, and her thoughts were scattered. After clearing the kitchen area, Deb advanced warily down the hall. Her stomach flip flopped when she saw the light poking out from under John Paul's closed bedroom door. Anger surged through her, driving the fear out like oil in water. She was going to make the bastard *pay* who was stealing her dead brother's trading card collection. Inhaling deeply and resting her shaking hand on the doorknob, she counted off to herself. She threw

the door open, drawing the shotgun up in front of her.

7. Voodoo Child

Notes for the Chapter:

. . . Let me just say I'm sorry for my almost 9 month hiatus. It's been a difficult time. Things are just starting to ease up some, and with the new release of Stranger Things 2, well, instead of quenching my desire to finish this story like I thought it would, it only fueled it. I guess good storytelling makes me want to tell a good story.

Anyway, I'm back at it for now! I've got a very clear ending in mind, and it's looking very Duffers-esque.

You'll best enjoy this song if you listen to this public Playlist on YT or Spotify (without shuffling)

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZsmsZMQoT4ug44tAEVd794QxBMATbLv0)

[list=PLZsmsZMQoT4ug44tAEVd794QxBMATbLv0](https://open.spotify.com/user/recreationclothes/playlist/5k1F56gvE0jPeDnC9ucCRc)

or

<https://open.spotify.com/user/recreationclothes/playlist/5k1F56gvE0jPeDnC9ucCRc>

Tell me how the whole playlist thing works out!! I've thought about it from the start, but never had the guts to venture that way.

Enjoy! Comments, kudos, subscriptions and bookmarks mean the world!!!

~chorkie

Ten stumbled blindly, numbly through the mess of tree branches and roots, teeth chattering in a sharp rhythm, driving him onward. He pressed forward, bloodied toes snagging on every protruding stem and stone. He was cold, *soo cold*. He wasn't quite sure how he was managing to keep moving: his entire body felt like a solid block of ice, like his fingers would shatter if he kept breaking his fall with them. The only warm part of his body was the hot, searing pain shooting up his thigh. Blood had drenched his leg, running down it and soaking through the grungy sweatpants, only amplifying the

bitter freezing. His lungs heaved, feeling scorched and frostbitten at the same time of each ragged intake of breath. Ten yelped, tumbling to the ground. He lay there awhile, curled up on the leaf strewn forest floor. *Boom, boom, boom*, thundered his aching head, pulsating like a second heart in his skull. Struggling to lift his head, his eyes lighted on something. He laughed weakly, tears streaming down his frozen face like liquid nitrogen. A building. A small, slightly dilapidated cabin. *Warmth*. Ten scrambled to his feet, dashing toward it haphazardly. Seizing the doorknob, he wrenched it back and forth. It didn't budge. He darted around to the back of the house. Gripping a stone, he chucked it at one of the windows. It shattered with a crash. Ignoring the shards of glass biting into his hands, he leapt up onto the ledge and hoisted himself over it. He tumbled over the dresser and landed on the floor with a *thud*.

Vlad hoped Jessie didn't notice how sweaty and clammy his hand felt, or the way he tried not to stiffen every time her arm brushed his as they followed Pickle up the brick path to the Li's front door. *Come on, man*, he scolded himself. *This is the last thing she needs right now*. Jessie didn't seem terribly out of the ordinary now, merely sleepy. She planted her forehead on Vlad's shoulder when they came to the porch, and Pickle let out a shouted string of words in Chinese followed by a long retort from behind the door. When it swung open, the three were greeted by a wild head of flaming red hair, and a pretty, thin woman who had unsuccessfully tried to tame it. She grasped Pickle by the shoulders and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

“Mam,” Pickle protested.

“Hello to you too, my dear,” she replied, examining him shrewdly. “How are ye?” Even after years of knowing her, Vlad and Jessie still had a tough time deciphering what Mrs. Li said through her thick Irish brogue.

“I'm fine, Mam,” said Pickle, adopting the same accent. Vlad thought it was kinda funny how easily he did this, switching from Chinese to American English to Irish English unconsciously, adapting

to whoever he was speaking with. Granted, Vlad could do the same thing to a much lesser degree. But Russian was only spoken at home, and often in whispers. Their neighbors were well aware they had ‘filthy Ruskies’ living among them, but the Leonid family tried hard not to emphasize that fact. They did their best to go about their business not causing any trouble to anyone, not causing a ruckus. Of course, that reputation had become somewhat tainted what with Vlad being part of the infamous Guild of Rogues and Misfits.

Mrs. Li turned to Jessie and Vlad, giving them a warm smile. “I suppose ye’ll be quite peckish about now. Come in an’ have a seat. I’ve got some supper still on the stove top for ye.”

The three ate ravenously, not speaking until each had gone back for seconds. Pickle was sent off to do the dishes, while Jessie and Vlad arranged their sleeping situation in Pickle’s room. The fifth bedroom had been added ten years after the rest of the house had been built, only accessible from the garage. Pickle was an only child, but always had at least three aunts or distant relatives from China occupying the original bedrooms. The garage, now only a storage space, was turned into a game room for Pickle’s friends, full of board games, a foosball table, and a broken mechanical bull missing its head. No one really knew where that came from.

Vlad and Jessie shrugged their backpacks onto the floor of their friend’s bedroom and dragged the stowed sleeping bags from the closet, spreading them out. Once in their pajamas and Pickle finished his chores, they gathered in the garage, playing blackjack with change and drinking Coke. Pickle and Vlad kept a close eye on Jessie, who, after a few sodas and winning rounds of poker, started to return to her normal rambunctious, foul mouthed ways.

“Eat shit, dickwads,” she chortled, having hit blackjack and taking the large mess of pennies and nickels that clinked pleasantly as she slid them across the table into her own pile. The boys shared a quick grin. Pickle, who played House, had lost miserably mostly to Jessie, but Vlad too had gyped him of at least three dollars.

“My money,” he moaned pathetically, honestly just glad Jessie was okay. He didn’t mind losing a few bucks. He still had fifteen or so dollars in his bank, unless Aunt Sun Qi had raided it . . .

Vlad let out a long, content sigh, taking a swig from his near empty soda can. “Good game,” he said, lounging back onto the ugly, mustard colored couch.

“Damn right,” said Jessie with a snaggletooth grin as she surveyed her loot.

Pickle got up, rushing past them quickly toward his room. Vlad snickered at his awkward gait. “Bite me,” he hollered back. Jessie smirked. Pickle returned with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in hand. “Wanna smoke?” he asked, sticking one between his lips and flicking the lighter.

“Sure,” said Vlad, taking one for himself and handing one to Jessie, who muttered thanks. “Light us up, Pickle boy.” He watched the tip of the cigarette glow for a second as he inhaled the intoxicating fumes, puffing them out in a practiced way. The three of them appeared to be in deep contemplation, their young faces placid. Once the general chatter had lowered to a minimum, the three headed to Pickle’s room and settled down for the night. Pickle lay awhile on his side, staring at the back of Vlad’s head in front of him. The steady, quiet snoring from behind him told him Jessie was already asleep, but Vlad’s breathing wasn’t quite deep enough for him to be the same.

“Vlad,” he whispered. “Are you asleep?”

“Not anymore,” he growled softly. “What do you want?”

Pickle was silent for a few moments. “Vlad, it’s been two years since, you know, John Paul . . . he’s been. . .”

“Say it,” hissed Vlad irritably, angling toward him. “John Paul is dead.”

Pickle gulped. “Yeah. Since he died. And Jessie. . . she’s still acting like it was a few months ago, ya know?” The shorter boy sighed.

“I know. And I don’t know what we can do about it. But dammit, we gotta do something.”

"She needs to see a shrink."

"Like she'd even *talk* to a shrink. But you're right. She does. No way can Deb and Uncle Buck afford that, though." The two laid in the dark silence, only broken by Jessie's soft snoring. Pickle grunted in frustration.

"I fucking hate this."

"You and me both, pal."

The first thing that caught Deb off guard was the music. *Sunshine of Your Love*, by Cream. John Paul's favorite song. The second thing was the fact that sprawled out on the floor was a young boy, dressed in tattered, oversized clothes, tears cutting harsh lines in his dirt and blood smeared face. He scrambled backward into the desk with a *thunk*. Shattered glass cut into the palms of his grimy hands. Startling blue eyes shot open wide with terror, darting around for an escape. Blood cracked on his pale face and in his nearly black, buzz cut hair, like crimson paint.

"Oh my gosh," Deb breathed, lowering the shotgun. Slowly, she knelt and placed it on the ground, raising her hands in a placating gesture. He flinched, and trained his wild gaze on her warily, chest heaving. Deb advanced toward him. The thin body curled up, covering his head and whimpering panickedly. "No no no, shhh. You're okay. I'm not gonna hurt you. You're fine." A single, luminous eye peeked out from under a bony arm, confused and hysterical. Deb smiled gently. "I want to help you. But I need to ask you a few questions, okay?" The blue met her brown fearfully. The teen cleared her throat. "Alright. I'll start. I'm Deb. Deb Hammond."

The boy muttered something inaudible.

"Tim?" she asked. "Did you say Tim?" He hesitated, then shook his head. Cautiously, he stretched out his arm, revealing a set of small black marks, contrasting against his fair skin. '010', they read. "What the- why do you have a tattoo?" An uneasy feeling settled

in Deb's gut. Something about this was really *off*. The boy pointed to the numbers, then brought his hand to his chest. The teen's eyebrows rose. "You're Ten?" A small bob of the shaved head. Deb took a step closer, but Ten shrank away. She felt a pang behind her ribs. Fishy or not, this boy needed her help. "You're probably pretty hungry, huh?" Another emphatic nod. "If you follow me, I can get you some food," she offered. Cautiously, she got to her feet. Ten stood, following after her into the kitchen. "Have a seat." Deb pulled out a chair from under the table, which he gingerly lowered himself into, looking exhausted from their short walk. The crystal blue watched her every move like a bird ready to fly away at the slightest sign of danger. Looking doubtfully in the fridge, Deb groaned at the lack of groceries within. Finally, she grabbed the milk carton from inside the door and the nearly empty cereal box off the counter, pouring two bowls. She slipped a spoon into each, setting one in front of Ten and taking a seat across from him. He scowled at the strange metal object in his hand, confused. His head tilted to the side, and he gave Deb a questioning look.

"That's a spoon," she explained. "You hold it in your hand like this, then you dip it in." She brought a spoonful of milk and Lucky Charms to her mouth, and a light of understanding dawned on him. Ten's eyes sparked like a ring of electricity in his irises when the cereal passed his lips, and he started to shovel it down, seeming to forget everything but he bowl before him. "You like Lucky Charms, huh?" Deb chuckled, and Ten started, like he hadn't heard the sound before. The corners of his lips lifted a touch.

"A smile looks good on you." He cocked his head and continued munching, eyebrows raised. "You know, smile?" An exaggerated grin crossed her face, and a shy smile crept onto the grimy face, lighting up his pale features like the sun breaking through a cloud cover. Ten drained the rest of his bowl, leaving a white mustache on his upper lip. Grabbing a napkin, Deb went to dab at it like she would have done for Jessie. The boy flinched and turned away, that cornered animalistic fear darkening his countenance again. This boy needed more help than Deb could offer; she was coming to that realization.

"Where are you from?" she inquired. The young, haunted

face turned to hers.

“Bad place,” he whispered, and a shiver ran up Deb’s spine. She swallowed.

“Do you have parents somewhere?”

Ten shook his head. “Gone.” He stated this in a matter-of-factly, in a way that suggested he had long accepted this, and was not very much bothered by it. The growing feeling of unease in Deb’s stomach swelled. Everything about this situation was off, wrong. As much as her heart ached to help him, she was sure there was more to him than met the eye. *I’m not even sure it’s my place to handle this*, she mused.

“How about aunts? Uncles? Grandparents?” Confusion. He didn’t know those words. Deb scratched her neck. “Look, ah, Ten, I think I need to call some other people into this, like social services, or the police, okay? There’ll be doctors to patch you up, and-” A look of total alarm crossed the boy’s face.

“No,” he insisted quietly.

Deb hesitated. Weighing her options.

“Alright. I won’t,” she lied, avoiding Ten’s gaze. She got up from the table and fixed another bowl of Lucky Charms for him, her resolve hardening. Even if the boy didn’t want it to happen, Deb knew there was no way she could do this on her own. She had to call *someone*. With Ten occupied, she left the room and crept carefully to the phone at the end of the hall. Casting a furtive glance behind her, she picked it up and dialed 9-1-1, the tone ringing in her ears. She hung up before dispatch could answer. Her brow furrowed. What was she thinking? Shaking her head, Deb dialed again, immediately hanging up once more. She growled in frustration, bringing her hand to the receiver again, but found herself unable to. Her arm would simply move no further. Deb willed herself to reach, a bead of sweat breaking across her forehead in concentration. She spun around with a gasp. There stood Ten, a look of haggard anger and betrayal twisting his gaunt features. Blood trickled from his nose, staining his lip crimson.

“No,” he said, his hoarse voice trembling. He drew the back of his hand across his face, smearing the blood like red paint.

“Oh my gosh,” Deb breathed, frozen, bow now of her own volition. Ten’s eyelids started to flutter, and he swayed dangerously. Deb rushed to him just in time to catch his limp body. Lifting his painfully light frame into her arms, she laid him on the grungy couch and propped his feet up onto the armrest. Deb was drowning in the sea of her own shock, anger, and guilt. Shock because *holy hell, he’s fucking psychic*, anger because, *dammit, Hammond, you had to go and fuck things up, didn’t you*, and guilt because he was so terrified and thin it made her hurt.

Ten’s eyes drifted open and up at Deb hazily, then filled with fear and mistrust.

What had adults done to this poor boy that he was so terrified at the prospect of being discovered by one? Even if it meant exposing his *psychic fucking powers*?

And now, every thin, delicate strand of trust that had formed between them was snapped by Deb’s carelessness. Her betrayal had made sure of that.

Aw, *fucking hell*, what had she done?

“I’m sorry, whispered Deb, reaching to stroke his knit forehead. He didn’t have the strength to flinch. “I-I shouldn’t have done that.” Ten sniffled quietly, wet tumbling over his cheeks, cutting a clear line on his dirt and bloodstained face.

“Please, don’t bring them,” he pleaded, grabbing her wrist feebly.

“I won’t bring them, I swear. I want to help you; but I need you to trust me, okay? Can you do that?”

“What is trust?” Ten asked softly. At that moment, her heart cracked in two, she was sure of it.

She swallowed. Gosh, how do you explain trust? “Trust is . . . knowing that I’ll do everything I can to help you and keep you safe

from those bad people, and that I would never *try* to hurt you. Do you think you can do that? Trust me?"

Ten's blue stared right through Deb's warm brown eyes, reaching into her soul gently, probing.

"I . . . trust you." His voice sounded very small and very afraid. But confident, too.

The tentative warmth growing inside of Deb sprouted into a small smile. "Let's get you cleaned up," she announced, getting to her feet. Ten managed to do the same, albeit a little shaky. Deb offered him her hand. He uncertainly slipped his long, thin hand into hers, leaning on her on the way to the small bathroom. Rolling up her sleeves, Deb knelt by the bathtub and turned the spigot, adjusting between temperature tests. Once she deemed it right, she wiggled the plug into place. She turned and saw Ten looking at tub warily, then glancing at Deb as if to say, *do I really have to do this?*

"Here, uh, Ten, once the water has filled it, you'll need to uh, take your clothes off."

The dark haired boy pulled the baggy, three-sizes-too-big tee shirt over his head and dropped the ratty sweatpants in a single, smooth motion. Deb's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. "Or now works fine too," she muttered. It wasn't like she'd never seen a boy naked. She occasionally took the odd babysitting job. She'd even had a little brother, for crying out loud- but the sudden, unabashed move had caught her off guard.

Her wide eyes narrowed, "Oh my gosh," she breathed. Ten's naked body was covered in various cuts and numerous bruises; *adult-sized, hand-shaped bruises*. Deb's blood started to boil. She wanted to make whatever bastard that did this pay. "Somebody hurt you, didn't they? That's why you ran away," she queried in a low voice. The boy nodded somberly, face grave and too full of pain for Deb to bear. She blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the blurriness in her vision, and set to the task at hand. "Here, get in the tub," she ordered kindly. He obeyed, passing her to do so.

"What the hell is that?" she demanded, startling Ten. He spun

around, alarmed at her urgent tone. “On the back on your neck.” A long hand reached back to cup the round, quarter-sized inhibitor at the base of his skull. The haunted look clouded his features.

“Bad,” he whispered hoarsely. “Hurts when I do bad.”

“Do you want me to try to get it off?”

Ten shook his head vigorously, clamping his hand over the thing protectively, the other hand moving across his throat in a slicing motion. Deb tried hard not to shudder.

“It’ll . . . kill you?” The boy nodded. Deb swallowed. “Can it go in water?” Ten bobbed his head again, lowering himself into the tub and hissing through clenched teeth when the water touched that nasty wound on his thigh.

Deb helped him wash, scrubbing and lathering him with soap for what felt like forever. At first, he shied away from her touch, but eventually the warm, comforting bath soothed him into a drowsy state. It took a long while to get the dirt out of his pores and to wash away the encrusted blood from his face. By the time he was truly clean, the bathtub had been drained and refilled twice. Deb went to fetch Ten some clothes. Stepping into John Paul’s room, her mind flooded with memories. John Paul wearing his boy scouts uniform. John Paul doing the dishes on Christmas morning, in his ugly sweater. John Paul’s cheek against hers, soft and sweet. Her stomach panged sharply. Blinking the tears away, she grabbed a pair of Starwars PJs her brother had been starting to grow out of, and a pair of underwear. She hurried out as quickly as possible, returning to Ten sitting buck naked on the toilet seat, waiting patiently. Before dressing him, Deb dumped out the first aid supplies and tended to the various cuts and scrapes, the worst of all being the deep wound on his thigh. *Puncture, maybe shrapnel*, Deb guessed. She decided to leave that for last.

Now that the grime had been washed away, the girl saw just how bruised he was. A greenish blotch covered the left side of his face, and the same eye had a discolored, purplish swelling below it. Dark hand shapes marked his wrists and arms. Deb sighed, wanting very badly to somehow, make everything right. But that was

impossible.

With the greatest care possible, Deb cleaned out the open injuries, dabbing at them with hydrogen peroxide and bandaging the ones that needed it. Lastly, dreading the task, she came to his thigh, looking at him sympathetically.

“This is gonna sting like heck,” she warned him, holding up the peroxide over the wound. “Ready?” Ten nodded tersely and set his teeth, grinding them together when the sharp pain shot through his leg, fizzing like an overly carbonated drink. He’d felt worse. Far worse. His leg might have twitched a little, but he could handle the pain. Tenderly, Deb wrapped a few layers of breathable gauze around his thigh. Ten yawned widely. Deb helped him into the warm fleece pajamas and led him into hers and Jessie’s room. He practically crawled into the bed, letting Deb pull the covers up to his armpits. The blue eyes fluttered open and closed, but his ear was intent on the tune coming from the box on the dresser.

I'm changing, arranging

I'm changing

I'm changing everything

Everything around me

The world is

A bad place

A bad place

A terrible place to live

Oh, but I don't want to die

Oh, my sorrows

Sad tomorrows

Take me back to my own home

Oh, my crying (Oh, my crying)

Feel I'm dying, dying

Take me back to my own home”

Ten had never heard this before. It turned his blood to liquid longing, flooding his body with a pining for an unidentifiable something, an *everything* that he had missed. “What is it called?” he asked, staring

up at the now quiet box. Deb frowned, not understanding. “The sound.”

“Music,” she replied.

“Is there more . . . music?”

“Yeah. Sure. I’ll put more on,” said Deb, opening up the cassette player and flipping the tape. “So you like Marmalade?” Ten cocked his head, not understanding. “The people who made this music.” The boy shrugged sleepily.

“That one is . . .” he paused, searching for the right word. “. . . beautiful.” Deb nodded, smiling a little.

“Yeah. It is.” Ten yawned. Deb turned to leave, reaching for the light switch.

“No,” came the urgent plea. “Please, don’t go.” Seeing the terrified look on Ten’s face, Deb took a deep breath and nodded, dropping onto the second bed next to him, rearranging the comforters and fluffing her limp pillow. “Goodnight, Ten,” she whispered to the boy, who was already fast asleep. She clicked the light off and followed him.

A loud wail filled the air, jarring Ten awake. He bolted upright, head thundering like a bass drum was being pounded over and over inside his skull. He moaned a little, clamping his eyelids together to shut out the blinding daggers of light shining through the open compartment door. Panic swelled in his throat. His eyes flew open. Carlo. His gaze fell upon the coroner, passed out face down on the boarded floor. Ten let his eyes drift close again, only to snap them open once more. Dark pools of half dried blood surrounded the prone figure. The boy rushed to his side, then stopped halfway. The blood had soaked through Carlo’s shirt and spilled onto the ground, staining everything a deep, reddish burgundy.

“Carlo,” said Ten urgently, shaking him briefly, then recoiling with a gasp. Carlo was stiff and still. Ten’s breathing became quick and

shallow. His head boomed relentlessly. With a grunt, he struggled to roll him over onto his back. Ten choked. The man's face was frozen in a blank expression, void of anything resembling the Carlo Ten knew. That was Carlo's face, but it wasn't Carlo's face. Hands fumbling, Ten reached for his neck, pressing his fingers to the jugular vein. Nothing but cold, tensed flesh. His breath came sharp and ragged.

“No, Carlo!”

8. Of Orange Juice and Near Death Experiences

Notes for the Chapter:

Heyee, my dudes :)

Here's some more action-y stuff and a buncha stuff that will make a lot more sense later on. This was originally going to be two and a half times as long as it is, so I chopped it up into two chapters. So sorry if it seems a little choppy.

Thank you LOADS to y'all who've been so kind to look this over when I asked. It means a lot to me to get feedback from writers I respect.

Expect more soon!

~chorkie

Saturday, November 12, 1983

Deb awoke to the sound of sobbing. She looked up groggily, and found herself in inky darkness. John Paul must've been having nightmares about Mom and Dad again, and climbed into bed with Jessie.

“Papa, no, don’t hurt him, please, Papa, no, no, NO!” he cried. “Carlo!” Deb jolted upright. That was not John Paul.

“What the hell –” then it all came flooding back to her in an instant.

Mom and Dad were dead.

John Paul was dead.

Uncle Benny was dead.

There was a little boy named Ten in the bed next to her, not Jessie and John Paul. Ten, terrified, beaten and hurt, so frail Deb thought he might snap like worn rope. Fractured, maybe beyond repair. The

boy bolted upright, gasping. His wild eyed gaze shot to Deb, and he scuttled backward into the corner.

“You’re okay, Ten,” Deb hushed, “You’re okay. It’s just me.” She couldn’t see his face, but he seemed to calm down a little. He gulped back a strangled whimper, his thin outline curling into a tight ball. His breathing hitched as Deb rested her hand on his shoulder gently. She slowly pulled herself onto the bed and enfolded the weeping boy in her arms, feeling his sweat and tear soaked clothes and rigid body. He froze, like he was expecting some sort of pain.

“Do you trust me, Ten?” Deb whispered softly. Ten only broke down into more sobbing, but buried his face in Deb’s shoulder.

Yes, he wanted to say, yes, *I do trust you*. But in some twisted way, he didn’t want to. He *did* trust Deb, and that was the problem. *I trusted Carlo. Look what happened to him: he’s dead. If I trust you, the bad men might come after you. To kill you. I don’t want that to happen.*

Try as he might, Ten could find no way to distance himself this good, comforting figure who wanted to help him. “Yes, I trust you.”

He hated that. Knowing what it could bring upon her.

“Then trust me when I say you’re okay. They can’t hurt you here.”

No, they sure could. And would. Still, knowing that this peace would be washed away in the flood of death brought by the bad men, he pulled closer to Deb, blinking his wet eyes into her shirt, savoring the comfort it while it lasted. Sleep quickly recaptured him.

Timothy Weiss was trapped.

GET ME OUT OF HERE! he wanted to scream, every time his mother or one of his nurses passed by. He couldn’t move, couldn’t talk, couldn’t even let anyone know that no, he wasn’t all-but-gone. He was still very much alive inside, as much as he hated that. He wanted to be gone. To be free of his useless, immobile body, free of his mortal coil that only caged him in. His nurses, maids, even his mother now thought he was plain and simple a vegetable. That he had

the IQ of a retarded pissant. He hated them all, hated himself.

Let me die, he would beg, when his mother would sit by his side and fondle his overgrown hair, kiss his forehead and tell him she love him. *If you love me so much, then let me go*, he thought bitterly. Most of all, he was terrified of the hungry, otherworldly – Thing – that haunted his dreams. Stalking people like prey and cornering them alone, and – his breath and heart rate quickened. He just wanted out.

Many heavy, thick soled leather boots hit the ground in rapid succession as their owners brought their motorcycles to a stop across the drugstore parking lot, taking up one space per bike. Wild, heavily shadowed eyes stood out under a shock of pink hair gelled into a spiked Mohawk, maliciously licking up the pharmacy's façade. He adjusted the black leather vest over his bare, hairy chest. He hocked a fat one onto the pavement and cracked his neck.

"Think we'll need the guns, Jasper, baby?" asked a voice behind him, coming to his side and walking her fingers around his shoulder, angling her scantily clothed body toward him.

"No need," he said with a smirk, glancing down at the conveniently placed cleavage. The girl's red make up stood stark against her dark, thirsty eyes meeting his. She quirked an eyebrow. "These hick town shits probably never been held up by anything bigger than a pen knife. Police force here amounts to a grand total of twenty," he added in a smoky, raspy voice. "But put those things away, you little whore." She moaned as he squeezed her breast sharply. Jasper got back to business, turning toward the amassed forty or so crew members in similar biking gear, tattoos, leather boots and jackets, and dark eye makeup. "Move in. Grab what you can carry and let's get out of this jerkwater town." Taking a long step forward and pulling open the door with a tattooed hand, Jasper's eyes rested on the clerk, and the big name tag reading "Don." The man's gaze shot around at the motley, leathern clad crew now meandering his store.

"Can - can I help you?" Don coughed anxiously. Jasper flashed him a toothy grin.

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure you can. By handing over everything in the

register.” He planted a grimy palm on the counter top. Don swallowed quickly and shook his head.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Jasper frowned sadly and clucked. “That’s a no-go, pally. Hand over the cash, or you’ll be paying in more than greenbacks, capiche?” The clerk mumbled something and turned toward the cash register, hitting a few buttons. The phone rang. He automatically reached for it. Jasper’s iron grip captured his wrist, and those manic eyes bored into Don’s, his face now void of any humor. “No more funny business.”

“Please,” he stammered, “I – just don’t – please don’t hurt me.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that as long as you give me your *full* cooperation. Now put the money in a paper bag. And where’s the cashbox?”

“Cashbox –?”

Don was yanked out of his seat and dragged across the counter by his shirt, inches away from the malicious eyes and glinting teeth bared in a snarl. “Don’t try to fuck with me, you little shit,” purred the biker. “You lie again, and I *promise* you,” he paused to drag a finger slowly down Don’s temple to his jugular, “you won’t be alive enough to regret it.” Sweat beaded heavily on the man’s forehead, and his Adam’s apple bobbed like a buoy in the stormy sea. “Now tell me: where is the cash box.” It wasn’t a question this time.

“In the back, in the second locker to the left. Combination is 95277,” Don gasped, falling back when Jasper released him with a shove and a contented smirk, stopping to brush off the cashier’s shoulders and straighten his nametag. The clerk rushed to hand him the paper back with the money.

“Now,” he chortled, “that wasn’t so hard, was it? Loki, get on that, would you? Code’s 95277.”

“On it, boss.”

Jasper turned away, admiring the looting work of his gang. He

picked up a package of Rocky's X-tra tough beef jerky and carelessly knocked off the rest of the packages. "Oops, my bad. May want to pick that up" he commented with a rough laugh, glancing at a sign outside that read *Welcome to Poppiesville!*

Population tiny as fuck, he added with another chuckle. *Hmmm. Welcome indeed.*

"Shit."

Deb tumbled out of bed, walking into the closed door on her way out. She blundered down the hall, then turned around, realizing she'd just left the location of the blaring alarm. She returned and smacked it, ending the God-awful shriek. Muttering curses, she rubbed her bleary eyes, then laid them on the mysterious, dark haired boy, still lost in oblivion. His normally drawn brow was softened, leaving an innocent, angelic glow about his freckled face. In his unconscious and uncaring state, he looked like a normal kid (minus the bruises). Sleeping contently in a bed all to himself, in his own room, dreaming about Star Wars and pirates and other little boy things. He was a boy without some unspeakable past that left him crippled and scared. Anger swelled in Deb's stomach, tinged with grief. John Paul's future had been taken away from him. She may have only known this boy for a grand total of nine hours, but she wanted better for him.

With a shake of her head, the teenage girl shuffled into the kitchen, once more opening the barren cupboards and refrigerator in forlorn manner. Eggs it was, with the last of the orange juice. Removing the carton from the fridge and opening it, she cracked the remaining four eggs into a bowl, whisking them together with a fork. A confused looking Ten appeared just as the eggs had finished cooking, bare feet padding softly on the cold linoleum. He shivered, eyes fixed on the steaming food. Deb gave him a smile.

"Good morning," she greeted. Ten glanced at the window, where light was flooding in with a warm yellow glow, in a way only glorious morning could bring. The birds outside warbled and chirruped, singing of the silver dusk's passing, and the return of

golden dawn. Ten was safe; at least for now. The Bad men still though he was dead. He had food, he thought hungrily, as his stomach growled aloud at the aroma of the scrambled eggs. Everything around him was singing and happy.

So yes, he thought. It is a good morning. The only thing more he could wish for was that Carlo was here to see it. Ten felt guilty. Here he was: safe, comfortable (he'd never conceived the idea that clothes could be so soft), alive, drinking in deep droughts of freedom. But Carlo was dead. No more could *he* see the majesty of the tall, mysterious forest, or hear the sound of – was it . . . music? No more could Carlo feel the radiated warmth of a fire at night, or the taste of ‘tacos.’

His thinking was interrupted as Deb piled the strange yellow blobs onto his plate and handed him a metal object like the ‘spoon,’ except it had four prongs. A glass of orange liquid was also placed in front of him. His mouth flooded with saliva. The short haired girl sat across from him, folding her hands on the table and tilting her head down. Ten furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. He tried folding his hands and leaning down to get a look at whatever she saw, but to no avail.

“Amen,” she said, looking up and stabbing her own utensil into the steaming food on the plate. “*A men?*” Wasn’t it supposed to be *a man*? Ten shrugged, and followed suit, loading his own fork with the warm, buttery yellow stuff, with its texture wet, yet solid. He liked them, he decided, quickly shoveling the rest down and taking a big gulp of the orange liquid. While he felt content, his body said otherwise. Deb sighed, stacking his plate on hers and lifting it away.

“Wait,” Ten said, more than a little embarrassedly, “can I . . . eat more?” He watched her face apprehensively, unsure of what her response would be.

“Of course,” she said easily. “We don’t have any more eggs, but we’ve got a little milk left, and some Lucky Charms,” she offered. The buzzed head bobbed enthusiastically. He quickly tucked the rest of the food away ravenously, feeling a little . . . well, we wasn’t sure. He’d only felt this way once, the first time he’d eaten at Carlo’s, when he had served ‘Tacos.’ He let out a contented sigh, and took another swig of the sweet, orange drink.

“What is it?” he asked, voice rough from misuse.

Deb frowned a bit. “Orange juice.”

Ten’s eyes opened wider. He didn’t know you could make juice out of orange. He wondered what green juice tasted like. Or red. Well, maybe red juice was blood. In that case, he’d tasted enough red juice for a lifetime.

“Mary, mother of –” yelled Vlad, when the trio pulled their bikes into the parking lot, gaping at the huge spray paint mural covering the whole storefront, depicting huge walls of bright green flames licking up the windows.

“Should we call the police?” asked Pickle, anxiously eyeing the motorcycle parked at the end of the lot.

“We gotta see what happened to Don. He’s always been cool with us, you know? We need to make sure he’s okay,” said Vlad, dismounting and pulling the front door. The two remaining Guild members filed in after him. They flinched when the door shut with a slam.

“Holy shit,” breathed Vlad, “They freaking trashed this place.” Their eyes landed on the prone figure of Don Graham, slumped over the counter top with blood pooling out a gash on the back of his head. The three rushed to his side.

“Don’t move him,” barked Jessie, when Pickle moved to set him upright. “Remember Boy Scouts first aid? Never move an injured person until you’re completely sure it’s safe, unless there’s a fire.” She placed two fingers on Don’s wrist and sighed. “He’s alive. Just out cold.”

“Thank God,” muttered Vlad. He tugged on the severed phone cord hanging limply off the edge of the counter. “Line’s cut,” he noted.

“Shhhhhh!” hissed Pickle, yanking them down into a crouch.

“Ow!” complained the Russian boy, rubbing his arm where it hit an

aisle.

“Can it, there’s somebody in back using spray paint.”

“Sonofabitch’s gonna get it,” Jessie growled.

Vlad turned his head side to side, poking his head around the corner of the row. “Weapons?” Pickle pointed to a broom closed in the EMPLOYEES ONLY area.

“Mops.” The three crept forward. Pickle placed a hand on the doorknob and slowly eased it open, wincing when it squeaked midway through. Mops were distributed, and the crouching Guild advanced farther into the stock room. A spray can hissed from around the corner. Vlad cocked an ear and glanced out from behind a stack of toilet paper. He held up one finger. *One*, he mouthed. Then, he held up five fingers, counting down. Jessie and Pickle nodded, gripping their mops tightly.

“NOW!”

“What the – fuck!” Jessie whipped the broom stick like a staff into the back of the perpetrator’s knee, sending him to the floor.

“Fuck you, numbnuts!” screamed Pickle, swiping wildly at the figure stumbling to the ground. The leather clad man yelped, grabbing the advancing Vlad by the ankle and yanking it out from under him. The boy gasped, and was caught up into a head lock. Jessie and Pickle froze. Vlad felt an icy cold cylinder pressed up against his ear.

“Move an inch and I’ll blow his fucking head off,” snarled the hooligan, tightening his arm across Vlad’s neck when he desperately pulled on it, digging the revolver’s barrel into his head. “Drop the sticks,” he ordered. They complied. Jessie’s face was sheet white, and Pickle looked close to tears. With a cough, Vlad made eye contact with the other boy, shooting his eyes up at the corner behind him. The Asian boy gave an almost imperceptible nod and gasped loudly, pointing away. In the split second the man looked away, his captive seized the arm with the gun and flipped the thug over his head, snapping the wrist with a sickening crack. He wrested the pistol from the limp hand and held it straight out at their attacker at a safe

distance.

“Holy mother of – shit, that was *righteous!*”

“Shut it, Pickle,” barked Vlad, eyes trained on the moaning perp. The thug glared at him, eyes glazed with pain, but gears obviously turning. “Want some metal in your kneecap?” growled the curly headed boy. “Then don’t try me, you dumb bastard. On your face.” The man complied, and Vlad whipped the gun butt into the back of his head. The tensed body went slack.

Both blonde haired girl and lanky boy stared at him.

“Oh, stop, you guys, you’re making me blush,” the shortest of the three said with an (almost believable) casual laugh.

“That was – “

“Most badass thing – “

“– bitchin’.”

“– I’ve ever seen.”

Vlad gave a half shrug, actually blushing now. “Sambo lessons with my brothers paid off then, I guess.”

“Damn straight,” added Pickle. They stood in a semicircle of mixed awe and awkwardness around the prone body of the man Vlad had just vanquished.

Vlad cleared his throat. “So, uh, let’s tie this wastoid up and call the police, okay?”

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeahhhh So Jasper's a dick, Deb is just a mom all the time, Ten's a bean who needs a Deb, Vlad's a bamf.

Also, kudos to you if you know what Sambo is ;) I'm a Jiu Jitsu kinda kid myself, but I'd love to crosstrain.

What the hell is up with Timothy Weiss?

9. Leads/Combustion

Notes for the Chapter:

Heyee my dudes :)

I wanted to get this up ASAP, but I don't have time quite yet to post the playlist with it, so I'll have to do that later. Eventually, I'd like to have a playlist for each chapter. Reason: I love good storytelling, and music tells a good story.

Anyway, THANK YOU soo much to all of you who have commented and critiqued. It keeps me going :)

Enjoy!

~chorkie

Groaning in frustration, Parker threw the jumbled sheaves of paper together and threw them haphazardly into a manila folder, then placing it in the top drawer of the filing cabinet behind him. He took his glasses off and put them on the desk. He glanced around at the nearly pristine room that served as both his bedroom and office. Already, he noted angrily, he'd forgotten to make his bed and wash his basketball uniform, which was lying on the shaggy carpet floor. He sighed. And no leads on the Chad McReady and Marie Pascal murders, Rodney Josephs' strange coma, or Anthony Schultz's disappearance into thin air. Nothing on the weapon used in the murders, the strange sticky membrane found encasing Josephs' body, or where Schultz may have run off to. His family in Virginia had been contacted, but still, *nothing*. Parker was used to the occasional petty theft or missing dog. But *double homicide*, missing person and mysterious medical condition were uncharted grounds for him. He didn't like not knowing where to start. Placing his hands on the armrests of his plush desk chair, he lifted himself onto his feet. Just

then, the phone gave a loud ring.

He tried for a cheery voice he didn't feel and sunk back into the chair. "You've reached the Montgomery household, Parker speaking. How can I help you?"

"Montgomery, it's Luther."

"Hey, boss. What's up?"

"There was an armed robbery at Don's Drugstore off Mountain Ridge Avenue, by the freeway entrance. I'd like you to report on it, and we'll put it in Monday's issue."

"Alright, sounds good, boss."

"Also, it's Josephs. He's awake now; and stable." Parker's yawn was interrupted abruptly, and any drowsiness he was feeling disappeared. "I want you to request an interview with him, and talk to a few officers on the case and see what you can glean from them. This is definitely going on the front page. Final draft is due by tonight, alright, kid?"

"Yes sir," said Parker, managing to keep his voice cool, but pumping his fist excitedly. "I'll see what I can squeeze in before basketball practice. Heading out now."

"Alright," said Luther. "See you tonight, Montgomery." The teen hung up the phone with a *cling*, shoving his tape recorder, notebook and a small Polaroid camera into his satchel.

"Hey mom," he called, scooping up his glasses and putting them on his face, "I'm going out for a story. I won't be back until after practice." He pulled on a coat over his sweater and stepped out into the hall. His mother stood holding out a container of steaming food.

"Make sure you take some time to eat before you practice," she said, and he planted a kiss on her cheek, taking the Tupperware.

"Thanks, mom. See you later."

"Oh, and go ahead and take the station wagon, son. And call me if

you'll be out later than eight."

"Yes mom. Bye."

He made his way toward the edge of the small town, as if to make for Hawkins. The midday sun was blocked by a heavy cloud covering, and the wind playfully tossed the tree tops around like flags in the wind. It set a gloomy overcast over the forest on either side of him, but it did nothing to dampen Parker's excitement and nervousness. After ten or so minutes, he came to the address.

"Shit," he breathed, pulling into the pharmacy parking lot. "What the hell happened here?" Putting the car into park, he pulled the tape recorder from his satchel and pressed the record button. "Parker Montgomery with the *Poppiesville Current Events*, at the intersection of Mountain Ridge and the freeway. Don's Drugstore. It's 12:57 pm of November 12. Investigating armed robbery, assault, and –" he leaned forward for a closer look, then getting out of the station wagon, "– extensive vandalism. On site, looks like there's some sort of spray paint mural on the front windows depicting *green fire*. . . and something written in Greek, I think." He approached the storefront, blocked off by yellow tape, squad cars and a fire truck with lights blazing. Only a few officers were on sight, hauling out a thuggishly dressed biker covered almost entirely in tattoos. Blood matted his greasy mullet to the back of his head. Parker's eyes were drawn to the fire truck, where a paramedic was attending to Don Graham's also bloodied head. Parker approached the unoccupied deputies, and groaned internally at the weary looks they gave him, as if saying, *oh great*. This *kid again*. All but Officer Denton, who greeted him with a nod.

"Hi, I'm Parker Montgomery, with the –"

"Yeah, yeah, we know," grumbled one. "Whaddaya want, prick?"

"Can it, Franklin," snapped Denton. "What's up, kid?"

Parker ignored the slur. "I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions, then have a look at the scene."

"Just don't get in the way. You've got ten minutes," said the first.

"Thanks." The teen resumed the recording. "So what's the deal?"

Denton placed his hands on his hips and looked off into the air while retelling the story. "Big biker gang comes here, sees an easy target. Shoves Don around and steals all the money plus some random items, like cigs, booze, and some toilet paper. They trash the damn place. They have some of their compadres leave their mark. Hence the green fire shit. Only insignia is in Greek or something. We're contacting someone for any match ups with any other graffiti reports in the state." The tall cop ran a hand over his shaved head. "Here's where things get foggy: that douche bag over there," he motioned to the thug being pushed into the squad car, "was found tied up and knocked out with a similar wound on the back of his head as Don has. He hasn't said a word, but it seems like he pissed off the gang boss, so they beat him up and call the cops as punishment." He nodded with his chin to the inside of the store. "Take a look, take some pictures."

"Thanks, Officer Denton. I appreciate your time," Parker said sincerely. The man gave him a smile and a nod.

"No problem. It's good stuff you write." The boy flashed him a grin of thanks and pulled out the Polaroid camera, snapping a shot of the spray paint mural and the strange writing in Greek. He opened the door and took some more pictures of the ransacked aisles. Parker passed into the EMPLOYEES ONLY area and found the broom closet open, void of anything except some Windex and bleach sprays. Frowning, he moved farther into the back. Three mops lay on the floor, along with a few uncapped cans of spray paint lying haphazardly on the linoleum. Frowning, he pushed his glasses farther up his nose and the camera snapped, producing a black image slowly developing. Eyes glued to the scene, he shoved it into his bag. Interesting. It seemed like there were three attackers roughing up the guy that was left behind, judging from the fact that there were three mops, and no other weapons were to be seen. He took another picture of the unfinished green flames licking up the back wall and lockers placed against it.

Hmmm. *Very* interesting.

After eating his now cold lunch inside the station wagon, Parker

drove back toward the center of town, parking in front of the one story building that was the Poppiesville General Hospital. The sharp smell of antiseptic hit Parker like a wall as he passed through the door. He approached the receptionist and offered what he hoped was a winning smile.

"Hi, I'm Parker Montgomery, and I'm with the *Poppiesville Current Events*. Could I get an interview with Mr. Josephs?"

The wild haired brunette didn't look up from her romance novel, only smacked her gum with disinterest. "Mr. Josephs isn't taking visitors now." Parker checked his wrist for his watch, regretting that he'd neglected to grab it on his way out.

"Is it past hours already?"

"No, he's just busy resting."

"But I thought he was conscious," Parker urged, face falling.

The girl glanced up at him in annoyance, then her look shifted to one with much more intrigue. "Sorry, Buddy Holly, but if you want to talk to Mr. Josephs, you'll have to speak with the staties," she said, nodding to the uniformed man guarding the hall. Parker's eyes narrowed slightly, and then met hers.

"Hey," he began, leaning over the counter top and blocking the trooper's view. "Where's the bathroom? Down the hall, right?"

"Yeah," she replied with another smack of her gum. "What's it to you?" The boy chewed his lip, watching the girl's eyes shift to them out of the corner of his vision.

"I'm sure I won't take long with the interview. You'd be doing me a huge favor if you could keep that fella *occupied* for me." The receptionist stared at him blank faced for a few moments, chewing away at her gum. Parker felt his gut sink a little. She was toying with him just as he had tried to toy with her.

"Well," she sighed at last. "I suppose I've got a few spare minutes. You've got five minutes tops."

Parker flashed her a sincere grin. “Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“Ah啊啊啊,” she scolded, laying a hand on his arm when he made to leave, “Don’t go running off just yet, Buddy Holly.” Her eyes met his seriously. “On one condition: your digits.” Mentally sighing, Parker obliged, jotting down his phone number on a piece of note paper, with his name scrawled above it.

“Thanks again.” He turned away and headed toward the blocked corridor.

“Good luck, Buddy Holly.”

The uniformed man had pulled up a chair and was reading an old issue of *International Male*. His head tilted up as Parker’s shadow crossed his face, and he folded the magazine with one thumb in it.

“Sorry, pal, no visitors today.”

Parker smiled apologetically. “Actually, I need to use the restroom. It’s at the end of the hall.” He pointed, and the trooper’s gaze followed. He shifted uncertainly, and Parker jiggled a little with a strained face. “Please, I really gotta go. I’ll only be a minute.”

“Fine. Make it snappy. No funny business.”

“Thank you,” Parker breathed, sounding relieved. He stepped into the hall and scanned his eyes around at the plaques by each door. When he reached the bathroom at the end, he reached inside and locked the door, shutting it and moving back up the corridor. *Ah. There we go.* “Josephs, Rodney”, read one plaque. With a furtive look behind him, and a small smile as the officer rushed to the receptionist’s aid when she knocked her coffee off the desk, he placed a hand on the doorknob.

Inside was a grossly overweight man, glasses slipping off his nose, tubes feeding into his arm and nostrils. “Surprised they let you in here,” he said in a nasal, crackly voice. He coughed, sending him into a mild convulsion. Parker eased the door closed behind him.

“Mr. Josephs,” he began, “I’m Parker Montgomery, with the *Poppiesville Current Events*. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions

about November 6, the night of Chad McReady and Marie Pascal's murder, and Anthony Schultz's disappearance?"

The doubled chin wobbled a bit. "Sure, I guess."

"Do you mind if I record?" inquired Parker, reaching for his cassette recorder.

"Nah, go ahead," the manager said with another violent cough. "Mind getting me some water from the tap?" Parker obliged, filling up a Dixie cup. Josephs took a deep draught and hacked again. "It's just a normal night shift. Cleaning up, you know. I'm sortin' through past month's income and all. Marie and Chad are cleaning the viewing room, just as normal. Tony – "

"Tony?" interrupted Parker, frowning.

"Anthony Schultz," he continued, shoving the glasses back up his broad nose. "Takin' his smoke break. And being damn tardy about it, too. Asshat always drags 'em out longer than he needs. I tell him get back to work, and the little bitch was playing passive-aggressive with me. Send him to help Marie and Chad. After a while the lights start to wack out, but I chalk it up to shitty power services. They go out. It gets real cold all 'a sudden.' Joseph's chin wobbles some more. "It was God-awful. It was like I got stuck in some nightmare, or . . . I don't know." He gulped loudly. "Hear this weird . . . growl, I guess, and then, next thing I know, I'm drowning in this shitty smelling goop like a body bag, choke on it, and then I wake up here. Docs say it's been six days." He shook his thick, balding head. "That's all I remember."

Parker was staring intently at the wall, eyebrows drawn together. "Do you have any idea what might've happened to Chad and Marie?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if that bastard Tony did it," he said with a snarl. "Has that psychopath kinda vibe to him. And now he's picked up and left? Pretty damn suspicious if you ask me." Parker hummed in reply, not convinced.

"Well," he sighed, "thank you for your time, Mr. Josephs. If that's all
—"

"Well," the heavyset man started uncertainly, voice cracking. "I don't know if it's anything to do with, you know, but I keep getting these fucking weird stoner dreams. When I'm awake." Parker met his eyes intently. "It's like I'm back in that nightmare place, but there's this fucking tall fella without a face –" he stopped. "You know what, never mind. It's probably the damn pain meds."

The young reported flashed him a focused, intense smile. The gears in Parker's head were spinning a thousand miles per hour. "Yeah, probably the meds. Anyway, thank you for your time. Take care." Josephs grunted. Parker made for the door, then pressed his ear to it.

Boom, boom, boom. "I know you're in there kid," growled a voice, pounding on another door. The boy allowed himself a small smirk. His little trick with locking the bathroom had worked.

"I hope you don't mind, but I need to use the window," said Parker, turning to face Josephs again. The unfriendly, cherubic face contorted in confusion. Parker didn't wait for a reply, but slid the pane to the side, popped out the screen, and clambered through. He closed the glass and fit the screen back onto the frame. He ducked into the bushes and sprinted for the station wagon.

"Life would be so boring without you two numbnuts to get me into trouble," said Vlad, after a long period of silence while the Guild rolled into the Hammond's driveway and dismounted their bikes. A kind of fierce pride lit up his steely grey eyes.

Pickle grinned at him. "You suck too, asshat."

Jessie punched his arm. "Shut up. He's trying to say he loves us."

Vlad scoffed, the corners of his mouth lifted in a contented smirk, and he quipped, "I never expected *you* to be the one to get all mushy on us, Hammy." The girl gave him a livid glare and pounced on him, tumbling to the ground.

"Me? Mushy? I'll turn your face to mush, you little –"

“DOGPILE!”

“Ooooffff,” grunted Vlad, who was stuck on bottom. “What’ve you been eating, you lards?” he wheezed. The heap of bodies shook with laughter, sending them into more hysterics. Pickle tumbled off the top and stretched out on the leaf strewn ground with a yawn. Jessie sat up on Vlad’s back, and stuck her slimy finger in his ear. “Offa me, Hammond.” He shrugged her off and got to his feet, then helping the other two stand.

As soon as the Guild bustled inside the cabin, the smiles dropped from their faces.

“Who the hell is he?” breathed Pickle, and the startlingly blue eyes snapped to his, cracking electrically.

“What are you doing in my house?” Jessie demanded, her voice low and dangerous. The boy opened his mouth, then shut it again, gaze flitting to each of the Guild. His tongue flicked out to wet his cracked lips. Pickle popped his knuckles, and the kid flinched.

“Why don’t we try this again,” said Jessie in a cold tone. “What the hell are you doing in my house?” Blue met steely grey, wild amber, and fiery green. The boy’s pulse quickened. A swallow stuck in his dry throat.

“Enough of this,” complained Pickle, and he pounced. Ten choked on panic, yelping and tripping backward.

“STOP IT!” Vlad bellowed, grabbing the Asian boy by the arm and whirling him around. “You’re freaking him out!”

“He’s freaking *me* out!”

“Shut your damn mouths!”

All eyes flew to Jessie, who tossed her hair back in annoyance. Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you wearing John Paul’s clothes?” she growled, hauling him off the ground with a shove. The girl reached for his shirt. Her body jerked back. “Son of a – “

A fierce determination set in the small boy's jaw. Blood dribbled down his nose. He smeared it with the back of his hand across his bruised face.

"Holy shit," muttered Vlad. Jessie was frozen, only her eyes darting around fearfully. Pickle roared in anger and flung himself at the pajama clad figure. He seemed to bounce backward, dropping as if he'd hit a wall. Vlad spread his hands cautiously, not making any sudden moves.

"Easy, there," he said, then exploded into a jab, connecting with Ten's nose. Ten stumbled, and Jessie and Pickle reanimated. A lightning fast right hand knocked him back further. Blood gushed from his nose, staining the flannel PJs. Vlad went to follow up with a third punch, but he slipped, landing on the ground. Ten's world tilted sharply. He dropped limply to the floor. His vision darkened, but he managed to stay conscious long enough to see a familiar figure rush in and shout over the din.

Ten noted groggily that he had done a lot of passing out and waking up to unfamiliar situations lately. Three sets of eyes bored into him, all with varying degrees of anger, giddiness, and grudging respect. The fourth pair was filled only with concern. Ten touched his tender nose, looking up at Deb inquiringly.

Jessie was fuming. "Why is he wearing John Paul's clothes, and getting his damn nosebleed all over them?" she demanded hotly, glaring at Deb.

"The clothes I found him in had been ripped to shreds. I wasn't going to put him in *your* clothes," replied the older girl.

"Why John Paul's?" she pressed. "I don't give a fuck—"

"Watch your language," Deb snapped.

" – who's clothes he wears, long as they aren't John Paul's." She glowered at Ten, her eyes burning into his like lasers. "Where the hell

did the freak come from anyway?"

Deb met her harsh gaze evenly. "That was not your choice to make. I don't know where he came from. How he got these – these *powers*, I don't know. I think he's a victim of human sex trafficking or something. Look at him; he looks like he's been in a battlefield. This kid needs help, Jess."

"Let the police help him," Jessie bellowed. "He's not any of our damn business."

"If you tell them," Ten interjected, voice shaking. He slowly dragged the edge of his flattened hand across his throat, then Jessie's. He took a deep breath and rolled up his sleeve, revealing the set of black marks set in his skin.

Pickle gasped. "Whoa, is that real?" Ten nodded solemnly.

"So," Jessie scoffed. "He's been kidnapped, or he's got fucked up parents."

"Language," Deb snarled again. "Show them the back of your neck," she said to the frightened boy, her hard stare never leaving Jessie.

"Mary, mother of God," breathed Vlad, staring at the quarter-sized metal embedded in Ten's neck as he turned around.

"This kid needs our help," Deb repeated, lowering her voice. "There's more to this than meets the eye. If the authorities *won't* be on our side, there's no way we're going to them for help. I don't know how, but we *are* going to figure this out. And we *will* help him. John Paul would not approve of how you are acting right – "

"Don't you *dare* bring him into this," Jessie hissed, tears streaming down her twisted face.

"It's too late for that," retorted Deb. "You already did, when you made this argument about him." Jessie's chest heaved. She swallowed a sob. It stuck in her throat like a hard knot.

"Deb's right," Vlad said quietly. "John Paul *would* want to help." A look of total fury and betrayal crossed the girl's face, and she stormed

out of the house. Deb collapsed onto the sagging sofa and sighed, rubbing her temples. Vlad and Pickle called after Jessie and followed her out the door. They split up, Pickle heading south, Vlad north.

“Jessie?” called Vlad, eventually approaching the all-but-abandoned tree house cautiously. The curly haired boy took a deep breath and scaled up the rope ladder, rapping his knuckles on the trapdoor in an intricate pattern. He tried again. “Jess, lemme in,” he pleaded. With a huff, he shoved the trapdoor up and pulled himself into the tree house. Her back was turned to him, feet dangling off the railed porch. She swung them aimlessly. Vlad took a look around the house and marveled at how little it had changed. Dust covered the little chairs pushed against the right side, and the playing cards scattered across the tabletop. A lopsided framed picture hung on the opposite wall, the image faded mostly to shades of blue. Taking a step closer, Vlad smiled sadly. It was the *whole* Guild at a water park, shirtless (all but Jessie) and shivering, huge grins plastered to their faces. Their staggered heights made a comical picture, with Vlad at least nine inches shorter than the tallest, Pickle. That much hadn’t changed. Jessie and John Paul were about the same height, right in between the extremes. *John Paul the Golden Boy*, he thought sadly. Boy Scout, student and best friend extraordinaire. Straight laced as they came. Vlad reluctantly turned away and took a seat by the brooding girl. Her face was blotchy and wet, her muted hazel eyes fixed on empty space.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said bitterly. “I’m *nothing* like John Paul would’ve wanted me to be.”

“Jessie – “

“It should have been *me* who died,” she whispered. “He didn’t deserve to.” Jessie’s sniffling turned into sobs. He let her cry for a minute, hand on her shoulder. But as horrible as he felt about it, anger twisted in Vlad’s gut, like sour milk.

“Shut up, Hammond,” he snarled at last. “Shut up and quit feeling sorry for yourself. I’ve had enough of your pity-party bullshit.” Jessie’s shocked face turned to his. “John Paul’s been dead for almost two years now. The rest of us are trying to move on, while all you can do is sit around and mope. Well, news flash, moping doesn’t

change a damn thing. It doesn't bring him back. All it does is hold – us - back!" Each of his last words was punctuated with a jab at her chest. Her blood started to boil.

"You don't have a fucking clue what it's like, you sonofabitch. I died that day too."

Vlad laughed, harsh and grating on Jessie's ears. "I don't have a clue? Really? You seem to forget that he wasn't just *your* best friend. Last I checked, you were, too. And the way you've been acting, you might as well be gone."

"Yeah, but it's not the same," Jessie said lamely.

"I *know* it's not, Hammond," he snapped, then taking a deep breath. "I know, no matter what happened or could've happened, you'll still always be closer to him than anybody."

"Vlad, I –" Jessie was surprised to see his eyes brimming with tears, nearly breached.

"You can't keep doing this to us, Jessie." His voice was broken, pleading. "Me and Pickle – well, sometimes, it seems like we lost the both of you. Not just John Paul." His ruddy cheeks glistened, barely contained sniffles breaking the tense silence.

"No," she found herself saying, a strange feeling swelling in her gut. "You haven't lost me yet. Not by a long shot, Leonid." She roughly grabbed him and yanked him into a fierce hug. They both half-laughed, half-sobbed, tears squeezed out through tightly shut eyes. "I'm . . . ready to move on." They separated, faces wet, but lit with smiles.

"I swear to God, if you tell anybody about this, Leonid, I'll skin you into a nice pair of boots," the girl growled, glaring at him playfully.

"Same goes to you, Hammond," said Vlad, grinning wide.

"And if you ever die in some stupid stunt like the one you pulled earlier, I'll kill you."

"Ouch," he complained, rubbing his arm where Jessie socked him. He

hit her back mercilessly. They shared a loud laugh. “It’s good to have you back, Jess.” Vlad’s steely grey eyes suddenly didn’t look quite so steely to Jessie. They retained their stark intense focus, but they had lost their sharp edge. With a shaky breath, and a small smile, she nodded and got to her feet. Vlad followed her down the rope ladder, and met her stride toward the house. His face instantly became warm enough to reheat leftovers on when Jessie’s hand brushed by his and captured it, fingers laced through his. He swallowed, wiping his other palm on his jeans. Casting a nervous glance down and their intertwined fingers, he noticed Jessie’s face had turned an abnormal shade of crimson. He suspected his looked the same. Their eyes met again, and they shared a giddy laugh.

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahhhh I liked writing this one. I’d planned out the little kerfuffle toward the beginning of my brainstorming, and I’m fairly happy with how it turned out. And writing the first half was more fun than I’d thought it would be. Parker’s become more of a 3D character while I was planning this chapter and writing it. Probably my favorite line is this: “I hope you don’t mind, but I need to use the window.” Or maybe Deb pulling a bit of a Ted Wheeler on Jessie.

The next chapter is a culmination of the past two, so it should come fairly soon, as I want to keep the recent events fresh in my brain.

10. Simple Pleasures

Notes for the Chapter:

Need a break from the emotional turmoil I put my characters through? Here, have a chapter of absolute pure fluff. I'm an angsty person, so I'm not super confident in my fluff writing abilities, but here's to improvement, eh?

I have a question for you, my good reader: am I making it clear enough how different El and Ten are, or are they too similar? Personality wise, I mean. I know they are very different, but I'm just curious if I'm making it clear enough.

Enjoy, and silence my inner bitchy critic with a comment! I might not respond because I'm an awkward person and one-on-one conversations are anxiety inducing, but I do really appreciate it.

Cheers,

~chorkie

Saturday, November 12, 1983

"Jessie, that is the dumbest idea I've ever heard. Do you *want* him to get caught?"

"No, listen, Deb. If we take him to basketball practice with us, we can keep an eye on him. If there really are bad people who are looking for him, there's safety in numbers, right?" Ten's head swung back and forth to each of the arguing siblings. Pickle yawned widely. Vlad rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and crossed his arms. Ten looked up and couldn't spot what the shorter boy had looked at. Deb glanced at her watch uneasily.

“Shit,” she breathed. “I gotta get ready for practice.” Sternly turning to her younger sister, she said, “Alright. He can come. But you *have* to watch like a hawk, okay? And put some clothes on him. He needs to look like a regular kid. I’ll cover up those bruises with some makeup once I’m ready.” She hurried into her bedroom and shut the door behind her.

“C’mon, uh, Ten,” said Jessie awkwardly, motioning for him to follow. Cautiously, he did, stepping after her and the other two boys into John Paul’s room. She faced away from him, in front of the dresser, standing stiffly. Ten couldn’t see her face, but he probed her mind just strong enough to brush up against the heavy blanket of sadness covering her. Pickle twisted his lips and gently pushed in front of the frozen girl, kneeling and pulling open the bottom drawer. He drew out a pair of faded jeans and held them up to the confused Ten’s waist. They fell short at his ankles, but the Asian boy shrugged and handed them to Ten, going back to search for more clothes. Soon, a t-shirt, denim jacket, and socks were piled into his arms, and he was sent into the bathroom to change.

“Is this real?” asked Vlad, staring after Ten when the door shut behind him. “Does he actually have psychic powers, or did Pickle’s mam put the wrong kind of mushrooms in the soup last night?”

“I think it’s real,” said Jessie, picking at the frayed fibers of the sagging couch. “Where do you think he came from?”

Pickles slanted eyes lit up with endless possibilities in a second, like he was watching multiple movies meld into one. “I think he’s an alien in disguise as a human, sent here to learn about earth so he can report back to his home planet. Oh! I’ll betcha their planning a full-scale invasion! And –”

“Yeah, no,” Vlad snorted. “Why would he let himself get all beat up?”

Pickle grunted, defeated. He gasped. “Maybe he’s been raised by wolves. Or a Russian spy!” Vlad made an indignant noise. “No . . . Oh oh! Maybe, he’s from the loony bin up in Kerly County, past Hawkins!”

“Pickle, if there’s any nutcase here, it’s you,” snickered Vlad.

“C’mon, guys” groaned Jessie. “I’m being serious! Where do you think he came from? And how’d he get those powers?” The three went silent, deep in thought.

“Think he’s an escaped MK Ultra experiment,” Pickle said decidedly. Jessie and Vlad groaned again. “No! Think about it; he’s got those numbers on his arm, he can’t really talk much, and *psychic fucking powers*. Tell me that doesn’t spell MK Ultra.”

“But MK Ultra was shut down in the 70s, wasn’t it?” said Vlad. Pickle ignored him and sat up straighter, eyes wide.

“You know that freaky energy company in Hawkins? What is it, Hawkins Department of Energy? My dad says they make weapons to fight the commies and shit. Maybe *he’s* one of those weapons.” Vlad frowned thoughtfully.

Jessie huffed disbelievingly. “Well, how do you think we’re gonna get out of this mess? Turn him in to the police? CPS? Maybe they’ll put him in an orphanage or something, or find his parents.”

“If he’s really an escaped experiment, there’ll probably be this huge investigation and shit, or they might keep experimenting on him. Some people would pay a fat buck to get their hands on a psychic kid,” said Vlad. “So we couldn’t just hand him to the police.”

“Oh please, don’t tell me you buy the experiment shit, too,” moaned Jessie.

“Well, then, *you* tell us, smartass,” Vlad said heatedly.

“He’s taking way too long to get changed,” noted Pickle, interrupting Jessie before she could retort. “One of us should go check on him. Nose goes!” Both his and Vlad’s fingers flew to their noses, Jessie’s a split moment later.

“Screw you,” she mumbled, heading down the short hall. She rapped on the door with her knuckles. “Hey, what’s taking so long?”

“Stuck,” came Ten’s muffled voice through the door. Jessie sent an incredulous look at Vlad and Pickle.

“Uhhh, what?”

“Stuck. Can’t get it on or off.”

Pickle snorted. Vlad raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

Jessie sighed. “Okay, Ten, I’m gonna come in.” She twisted the door knob and tried not to fall over laughing. She bit her lip and took a deep breath, appraising the sheepish boy with his arms above his head, both caught in an odd angle in the t-shirt, and his head peaking through an armhole. He was pants-less, though, thankfully, he’d kept the underwear. The boys were cackling behind her. Trying to keep her laughing to a chuckle, Jessie detangled his arms and put them through the right holes.

“Tight,” he said embarrassedly, tugging the sides of the shirt. Jessie frowned. It didn’t fit all that tightly. It was fairly loose, and reached almost halfway to his knees. Maybe it was just tight in comparison to what he was used to wearing. Ten flashed her the tiniest twist of his lips. He went to step into the jeans, and managed to slip into them without unbuttoning or zipping them. The waistband was loose around his hips, and would probably come down within a few steps. Jessie would have to get him a belt later.

Jessie and Ten came out red faced a few minutes later. Ten stood stiffly under the appraising eye of Deb, unaccustomed to the bulky, thick clothes in comparison with a paper thin hospital gown. The jeans fit much better with a belt around his waist, although they didn’t cover his ankles, leaving the pale skin exposed. The long, baggy t-shirt reached past his bony hips out from under the faded denim jacket, the only item them seemed to be the ideal size. The wool lined collar was flipped up, and a knit beanie covered the strange metal device buried in the back of his neck. His feet felt cramped in the shoes, despite the fact that they were a size too big. He liked the socks, though. They were soft and cozy. Deb managed to cover up the bruises on his pale face almost seamlessly with some heavy makeup application.

“He looks. . .” said Pickle, squinting thoughtfully.

“Ridiculous,” finished Vlad frankly. Ten stared back at them,

embarrassed.

“True. Not what I was going to say, but true,” admitted the taller of the two.

“It’ll have to do,” said Deb with a sigh. She slipped her arms into her jacket and snagged the keys from off the coat hanger by the door. The four filed out behind her. Ten’s eyes drifted to the clear cerulean sky in wonder, marveling at how blue and how untouchable it seemed. He recognized the boxy machine sitting in the driveway as a car. It was odd, he thought, that this strange metal box could get from place to place so quickly, and was the preferred method of travel.

“I call shotgun,” hollered Jessie, rushing and nearly diving into the seat as soon as her sister unlocked the doors. Vlad, Pickle and Ten piled into the back seat. Ten’s stomach jolted as Deb started the car and began to back out into the street. His heart raced.

“What’s your damage?” yelped Vlad, and Ten realized he’d clutched his wrist, leaving a mark on the Russian boy’s arm. “Chill out, would you?”

“Sorry,” muttered Ten, releasing his vice grip. Vlad glared at him and rubbed the bruise. He forced himself to sink into the worn cushioned seat, and his muscles to loosen. He watched in awe as the scenery outside flew by: houses with gardens, and trees, lots of trees, on either side of them, flying by so fast he could hardly focus his eyes on them for more than a split second.

After a few minutes they entered a clearing, and pulled into a gravel lot by grouped, large, stucco coated buildings, parking in a spot next to one structure with the word GYMNASIUM painted in a large header. The Guild and Deb opened their doors and filed out. Ten followed them cautiously into the gym, assaulted by the smell sharp smells of polished wood and antiseptic floor cleaner. Squeaking shoes and the *thump thump* of orangish brown balls hitting the planked floor echoed around the vaulted ceiling. The boy noted the odd lines marking the floor, and the two glass panes suspended at either end of the room with orange rings attached. Thin ropes interwove to make a loose net hanging off the rings.

Deb immediately turned a bright red when her gaze met a handsome, glasses-framed face from across the court. Wiggled eyebrows and elbow jabs were exchanged by the Guild.

“Hi, Parker,” Deb said, grinning a little stupidly.

“Hey, Deb,” he replied, flashed his own lopsided smile that Deb happened to think was infuriatingly cute. His friendly visage turned to one of concern. “I’m sorry to hear about your uncle,” he said, eyebrows drawing together. “How’s Buck holding up?

Deb took a deep breath. “We’re – getting by. Th-thanks for asking. He’s got a few days off work, so . . . yeah.” Ten frowned. Deb was acting strange. Almost . . . afraid. But happy at the same time. Parker’s warm, yet bright eyes rested upon the four younger kids.

“Well if it isn’t the Guild of Rogues and Misfits. Who’s the new fella?” he nodded toward Ten, who glanced behind himself nervously, unsure.

“Te –“

“Timothy,” Deb interjected, throwing a pleading look toward Jessie and the boys. “Yeah, uh, Tim, he’s our cousin.”

“Second cousin,” added Vlad. Ten’s eyes flitted around the small group like a ping pong ball.

“Hey, Tim,” said Parker, holding his hand out. “I’m Parker.” The boy slowly put out his hand too. “Are you from out of town?” Ten looked to Deb confusedly.

“You could say that.”

“From where?”

Ten blinked slowly and shook his head. “Bad place,” he said gravely.

“Czechoslovakia,” piped Jessie quickly.

“Huh,” said Pickle obviously. “I didn’t know that. I thought –“

“We have a lot of Czechoslovakian family,” Deb explained.

“He hates it there.”

“He gets *terrible* allergies back home.”

“Stuffy twenty-four-seven.”

Parker seemed slightly overwhelmed by the sudden bombardment of information, but mostly amused.

“Hey, how’s your journal coming?” asked Deb, eager to change the subject.

The teen whistled. “I’ve been running around like a mad man with the whole McReady-Pascal-Schultz ordeal. And there was an armed robbery this morning at Don’s Drugstore. I’m not quite sure what happened there, or if there’s any correlation with the murders of McReady and Pascal.” He missed the quick look passed between the Guild. “And did you hear about what happened in Hawkins? Will Byers?”

“Yeah, we went to his funeral yesterday. Uncle Buck is friends with his mom, Joyce Byers.”

“It’s can’t be a coincidence that all this is happening all at once. McReady and Pascal were killed on the sixth. Anthony Schultz goes missing the same night. So does Will Byers. In Hawkins, that night, the power blew in half the town.” Parker’s face was set in a determined scowl. “So I’ve been pretty busy.”

“I’d imagine,” said Deb, shaking her head. “Shit, those poor kids. What do you think happened to Chad and Marie?” The teen boy shrugged.

“I don’t have a clue. I’m sure it’s related to whatever happened on the sixth.”

A shrill whistle sounded, snatching their attention, followed by a deep bellowing voice. “Line up, ladies, and get running.” Deb disentangled herself from her tracksuit and jogged after the rest of the team.

The Guild and Ten took seats on the bleachers, watching the Coon's brutal warm up routine consisting of sprints, suicides and cone drills, later setting up two lines for rebounding and layups. After a while, the team started a scrimmage. Ten was riveted on the two towering center players crouching with the coach in the center, holding the ball. He tossed it in the air, and both swatted at it. It fell into the hands of the team opposite Deb's, and the point guard took it down court. Parker shuffled in front of the shaggy haired boy, blocking his view with a hand. Deb appeared to be guarding a short, agile boy a few inches taller than her. In fact everybody on Deb's team seemed to be guarding someone. It was like each player had a specific person to follow.

"What are they doing?" he asked. The Guild stared at him in mixed shock and confusion.

Pickle noticed the deep scowl of concentration on the mysterious boy's face. "Playing basketball," he said, as if that explained everything.

"It's the best sport ever," added Vlad, "besides wrestling, of course."

"Basket . . . ball?"

"What rock have you been living under?" muttered Jessie.

"It's a game," explained Pickle. There are two teams, right? Deb's team is in the black, and the other team has the yellow jerseys. What they want to do is get the ball in those hoops there." He pointed to the hanging glass rectangles with the rings and nets attached. They seemed really high up. Ten wondered if they had to lift each other up, or if they could jump that high. "That's called a basket. When they get the ball it, it's two points."

"Unless it's from past that line," interjected Jessie. "Then it's three." The freckled boy nodded slowly.

"But why do they throw it at the ground?"

"Why do they *what*?"

"Why don't they hold the ball and run?"

"That's one of the rules," said Jessie. "You have to dribble. You can only take two steps while holding the ball."

It seemed like 'dribbling' the ball must be really difficult. But the teams made it look easy. Especially Parker. He could pass it through his legs and back and forth to each hand quickly. At one point he even threw it between another player's legs and caught it on the other side. Ten's jaw dropped.

"Is he good?"

The three nodded back vigorously. "*Really* good. That's why he's the varsity team captain," said Pickle. Parker lobbed the ball smoothly to Deb, who jumped, throwing the ball into the air. Ten's mouth hung open even farther. The Guild whooped happily.

"Whoa," he breathed, amazed at how the ball had sailed through the air and through the net with a quiet *swish*.

After practice had finished, Deb came back to them happy, dripping in sweat, and looking ready to drop dead. "You see that?" she said eagerly, wiping her forehead. "How I kept nailing those three-pointers?"

Pickle nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, that was good shit."

Deb saw Ten's electric eyes studied the ball under her arm closely, with that quiet, steady intensity; like they could tear you apart, but slowly and with great consideration. "Wanna try?" she offered, holding the ball out to him. He took it, feeling the slightly bumpy, grippy leather as he stepped onto the court. He dropped it, and it bounced a few times before rolling to a stop. "Try pushing it down," suggested Deb. Taking her advice, Ten mirrored the piston like action, and managed to bounce it twice before it returned to his hands. His heart accelerated. It was . . . exciting. But not like running from the Bad Men exciting. That was also terrifying. This was exciting and . . . fun. That was the word.

A bashful smile lifted the corners of his mouth, which he directed at the watching group, sending him encouraging looks. More confidently, he began to dribble again, bouncing the ball now five

times before it fell dead to the wooden floor.

“C’mere,” said Deb, motioning for Ten to follow her out onto the court. Leading him under the hoop looming above him, he hoped it wouldn’t fall. “Here, I’ll teach you to shoot.” An alarmed look crossed his face, and he shook his head. The smile dropped like a lead weight in water. He wanted *nothing* to do with guns.

“Not that kind of shooting,” Deb amended hurriedly. “That’s what you call throwing the ball at the hoop.” Ten sighed in relief. Gently taking the ball from his hands, she placed one of hers on the side and another on the bottom. She raised it above her head and jumped, sending it spinning into the air and through the hoop. “It’s all in the flick of your wrist,” she said, repeating the motion. The ball bobbed back toward her. “It also helps if you jump.” Taking a step, Deb hopped, and it landed neatly through the net. Ten made after the runaway ball, taking it back to where Deb stood behind a white marked line. “Go ahead,” she said, giving him an encouraging smile.

Ten squared up with the basket, sliding his left hand underneath the ball it and leaping, releasing it midair. The ball glided smoothly until it dropped a few feet away from the basket. Ten’s shoulders slumped a bit, but Deb and the Guild looked impressed.

“Not bad,” said Jessie with a grudging smile.

“Try again,” Deb urged, handing him the ball again. The small jaw set, and the blue eyes sparked, locked on the hoop. The ball flew in a perfect arc, dropping through the net with a *whump hiss*. He yelped, dropping to the ground and clutching his thigh, where the searing pain was radiating from. Blood was seeping through the faded jeans. Deb rushed to his side, cursing herself under her breath.

“Oh, hell, I should’ve remembered. Fuck. Jessie, grab my bag, would you?”

Ten flashed a pained, but broad grin through his tears. “Worth it,” he said, beaming.

“I’m glad *you* think so,” she said unhappily, scooping the small boy into her arms and carrying him bridal style out to the sedan. Gravel

crunched underfoot behind them.

“Shit, what’s wrong?” asked Parker, eyeing the red stain on Ten’s pants.

“He must’ve busted a couple stitches,” said Deb, opening the door and depositing Ten into the passenger seat. “He’ll be okay.”

“I can patch him up, if you like. I’ve got intermediate first aid training,” Parker offered.

“That would be great. Thanks, Parker.” He gave her a cordial smile. Taking the injured boy from her arms, he led the way into the locker room. The Guild opted to stay in the gym, tossing the basketball around and shooting hoops.

Ten, once more, had no shame in undressing, although this time, only down to the borrowed underwear.

“Holy shit.” Parker inhaled sharply when Ten’s birdlike legs were bared, revealing the various cuts and bruises, and the blood oozing onto the gauze on his thigh. His eyebrows drew together as he turned to Deb. “What the hell happen?” he asked softly.

Deb’s mouth moved silently for a moment before her racing mind could come up with a somewhat believable excuse. “Some older kids heard him speak Slovak, and they thought it was Russian, I guess, and well, you know how things are with the Soviets, so they, uh, beat him up.”

“Damn fuckers,” Parker breathed with a scowl. Deb reeled a bit. She was sure she’d never heard him swear like *that* before. Parker was usually exceptionally polite with his language. “Do you know who it was?” Deb shook her head. He pushed his glasses up his nose and knelt by where Ten was sitting. The older teen unwrapped the layer of bled through gauze from the boy’s leg. His deft hands rummaged through the first aid box hanging on the far wall and found the glove box, a pair of tweezers and some scissors. Parker’s touch was gentle and light, and soon, with minimal pain, he had removed the snapped thread and re-stitched the wound before covering it with another fresh layer of bandaging. His warm gaze met the steady, bright blue.

Ten flashed him a coy smile. “Next time those bastards mess with you, give ‘em hell,” Parker said with a wink, and stood up. Ten slipped his unhurt leg into his jeans and started to ease the other into it slowly. Parker gathered the supplies he’d used and carried them back to the first aid box, which Deb had opened for him. The two sorted the items and put them back onto their correct shelves and compartments. Both reached for the roll of gauze, hands brushing. Deb felt the heat creep up the back of her neck, and she shot a glance at Parker, who was just as red as she felt. He closed the cabinet, and their eyes met. He cleared his throat, and they shared an uneasy laugh.

Ten frowned. Deb was acting strange. He decided to get to the bottom of this. Parker seemed good, and Vlad, Jessie and Pickle seemed to trust him, but Deb didn’t seem like her normal self around him. Almost . . . scared.

“I should get going,” said Parker, not looking away.

“Me too. Goodbye, Parker.”

“Bye, Deb,” he whispered, still not moving. Slowly, their already close faces seemed to gravitate towards each other, closer and closer . . . until the curly haired teen cleared his throat again and reached down to pick up his satchel.

“Th-thanks again,” Deb stammered, turning to face him as he stepped through the doorway.

“No problem,” he said with a smile. He hesitated, holding his breath before leaning in toward her.

Deb stood frozen for a good thirty seconds. Ten was hopelessly lost, nose crinkled in absolute confusion. Why- what – why was Deb not doing anything? Was it something bad?

“Are we leaving or not?” called Jessie, peaking her head into the locker room. Deb blinked and cleared her throat.

“Uh, yeah. We’re – we’re going now. She shook off her daze, leading the four kids out to the gravel parking lot. They piled in the sedan,

Ten seated between the two boys again. He wasn't sure he liked the feeling of their legs rubbing against his through the coarse denim.

"Deb," he said, eyebrows furrowed seriously. "Are – are you afraid of Parker?"

The other occupants of the car burst into hearty, good natured laughter, in a way that coaxed a giggle out of the perplexed Ten.

"No, she chuckled. "I'm not afraid of him. I just - well, it's complicated. Parker's my friend –"

"Friend?" interjected the freckled boy. The Guild traded *is he for real* looks.

"You know, someone you trust," offered Deb.

"Someone you like to hang out and do fun stuff with," added Pickle.

Pure confusion masked Ten's pale face. "Hang out?"

"Just be with," said Deb, brushing her short brown hair out of her eyes. Ten started to get the idea.

"Are you my friend?" he queried somberly, searching Deb's wistful eyes.

"Yes. We're friends. Vlad, Jessie and Pickle are all friends, too. Parker is my friend, but that's kind of . . . different."

"Different how?"

Does he ever run out of questions? Deb wondered with a sigh. She paused, looking at the inquisitive child. "I don't really know," she confessed. "It just is."

"I know," Pickle chortled, "Deb's got the hots for Parker."

"Shut up, Pickle," growled Deb between clenched teeth.

"What? Everybody knows. Everytime they look eachother they can't stop making googly eyes." Ten noticed she was gripping the steering

wheel very tightly, and her cheeks had turned that stunning shade of red, like in the *lock room*, was it?

A loud *oooooooooooh* chorused from the Guild.

“Debbie’s in *looove!*” said Jessie in a high, flirty voice.

Deb glowered and smacked her lightly. “Cut it out, would you?” Her words were drowned out by her sister’s and Pickle’s unsynchronized falsetto chanting of ‘Debbie’s in love.’ They erupted into laughter, and Vlad smirked bemusedly.

“Is that why Parker went –“ Ten mimicked what he’d seen him do, putting his lips swiftly on the corner of Vlad’s mouth. The entire vehicle erupted into hysterics whoops.

“He – he *kissed* me!” cried Vlad indignantly, shaking his wooly blond curls in horror. Deb had doubled over and smacked her head into the steering wheel. The car horn protested with a sharp blare.

“Was that – was that bad?” Ten asked, once their laughing had died down to sporadic chuckling. He eyed Vlad’s death glare concernedly.

Deb wiped the tears from her eyes. “Well, not bad, but kissing is something special. I kiss Jessie on the cheek ‘cause she’s my sister. That’s a different kind of love. You love family and friends like that. You kiss someone on the lips when you love them like . . .” Deb trailed off. “I’m not quite sure how to describe it.”

“Sorry,” Ten said sheepishly to Vlad, who shrugged it off, but still eyed him warily as they pulled out of the gravel lot into the tree lined road. The five settled into their seats and a comfortable silence.

“Wait, so Parker *kissed* you, Deb?!”

“Shut it, Jessie!”

Notes for the Chapter:

And now back to the emotional roller coaster.
MUAHAHAHA It only gets crazier from here. Hold onto your hats, glasses and butts.